



Moving Crisis to Opportunities: A Corporate Perspective on the Impact of Compassionate Empathic Behaviour on the Well-Being of Employees

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Abstract

The recent raging pandemic has disrupted the world economy in a humongous way causing socio-psychological stressors affecting the mental well-being of employees. The fear of losing jobs due to economic shutdowns, or facing challenges of digitisation of the workplace, or fear of contaminating illness generated a feeling of despair and panic to more serious paranoia behaviour amongst the employees. The present study aims at investigating how did the leadership use prosocial empathic skills during this pandemic to manage the mental well-being of their respective employees, so that they are motivated and engaged for meaningful performance. The major themes that emerged from the structured interviews of the apex leadership were (1) compassionate empathic behaviour impacts the employee motivation and performance; (2) open, honest and timely vertical communication promotes trust and bonding; (3) support for employee autonomy impacts their well-being; (4) encouraging competence and self-efficacy in employees; (5) promoting positive and healthy relationships by displaying compassionate empathy positively impacts mental health and thereby employee performance during crisis. Right from providing unified Communication platform, to displaying empathic leadership, the apex leadership unanimously believes that people are their best assets and if managed well in the crisis can help them stem the storm successfully.

Keywords Open and honest vertical communication · Empathy · Pro-social skills · Autonomy · Relatedness · Well-being · Post-pandemic revival

Introduction

COVID Impact on the Industry

Both India and the world have faced a humongous brunt of the pandemic in every sector of their economy be it the civil aviation, manufacturing, tourism, agricultural and transport etc. The major cause of this sudden fall in the economy is ascribed to a complete disruption in the demand and supply chain all over the world due to forced intermittent lockdowns. A report by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs has projected that the world economy is set to lose nearly \$8.5 trillion over the next 2 years besides it may likely push more than 34 million

people into extreme poverty. The Covid-19 which is seen as the rarest phenomenon since the 1930s Great Depression (Euro news, 2020), has shut down the large parts of the world economy leading to the closure of factories and affecting the employment of the people in a worst possible way (Hoque et al., 2020; Ramakumar, 2020). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the rise in unemployment because of COVID-19 could be up to 25 million worldwide.

In case of India, according to Raghuram Rajan, former RBI Governor, “This is the greatest emergency for the Indian economy since independence.” Every sector of the Indian economy has been hit hard and that too, disproportionately, including agriculture and its allied sectors like horticulture, and poultry, manufacturing especially automotive sector and MSMEs; and service sector that is the key driver of economic growth and largest contributor to the Indian GDP’ (Aneja & Ahuja, 2020). According to a survey by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (Nag, 2020), India’s unemployment rate could have climbed to more than 20 per cent

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as people lost their jobs due to frequent lockdowns during the years 2020 and 2021. The case in point is Mumbai's world renowned dabbawalas (lunchbox carriers) who were known for their efficient supply chain and logistics who are rendered jobless today and are not in a position to restart their work as many have gone to their hometowns and are unable to return (Prahlarao, 2020).

Impact of Pandemic on the Employee's Mental Health

However, these disruptions and upsetting of the economy due to the raging pandemic have also been found to be a source of major sociological, psychological and cultural challenges world over. These have been "a source of intense stress for the whole world population". There has been observed a negative effect on the mental health of people as reported by Ginger, a mental health provider. They point out that the majority of the employees (nearly seven in 10 workers) admit that the coronavirus pandemic is the most stressful time of their professional career and it even out beats stress they felt during the major events like 9/11 and the 2008 Great Recession. Varied reasons have been identified that could affect the mental health of people. Prominent among them being perception of safety, threat and risk of contagion (Brooks et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2019); or financial loss and job insecurity (Brooks et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020) or overloading of information and uncertainty (Gao et al., 2020; Garfin et al., 2020); or the fear of being quarantined and confinement (Qiu et al., 2020; Wanga et al., 2020), and suffering from the stigma and social exclusion (Xiang et al., 2019). Additionally, Das (2020) observes that the problems of mental health could be attributed partially to the hyper-active social media news that is full of negativity and sensationalism about the people and the disease.

Effects of COVID on Employees

This spread of fear, worry and concern across the population in particular amongst the working professionals, can take its toll on their work output or performance. Ginger confirms in their report that 62% of the workers are losing at least 1 h a day in productivity due to COVID-19-related stress, with 32% losing more than 2 h per day. No leadership or management in this world can afford or imagine to run a profitable organization with employees feeling mentally disturbed and morally low. Major complications that the employees faced, at their personal level, during these unprecedented COVID times, are adjusting to a new work-life situation that includes moving from face-to-face interaction to WFH model, leading to social isolation, deprivation and abandonment. Additionally, the fear of losing jobs due to economic shutdowns, lack of infrastructure, or facing the new challenges of automation

and digitisation of the workplace, or fear of contaminating illness generated a feeling of despair and panic to more serious paranoia behaviour amongst the employees. These socio-psychological stressors significantly affected the mental well-being of employees.

Role of Empathic Leadership

Since, employees are the real assets of any organisation, therefore it should become the paramount concern of all the managements in the World to ensure the health and well-being of an employee that should take care of their financial, physical, and emotional issues. This concern should become more pronounced especially in these trying times of dealing with a pandemic. Sally Welborn, former senior vice president of global benefits for Walmart Stores commented that "Whether they are working on the front lines or working at home, employees are urgently in need of accessible, equitable mental health benefits now more than ever." Further, Mayer (2020) suggests that "As employers wrestle with business continuity planning during COVID-19, this research confirms that employers need to make mental health support a critical aspect of that plan, or risk a dramatic impact on employee health and productivity".

Albeit, it is reported that many organizations have been proactive in taking control of employee's health and financial issues, howbeit they seem to have failed in attending to their emotional needs which can at times put both the employees and the organization into jeopardy. The research demonstrates that "emotionally expressive leaders were, in fact, more effective" (Groves, 2006:172) and consequently, they should hand hold the employees to stem through this time and be sensitive to their stress, anxiety and other concerns. Among the things they can do is focus on the humanization of work and display lot of empathy towards their employees. "Empathy plays a key role in our emotional and social interactions, it is essential for healthy coexistence among people, mutual understanding, and cooperation. It affects our motivation through prosocial behaviour, altruism, compassion and caring for others, it inhibits aggression, and is the foundation for morality..." (Bošnjaković & Radionov, 2018: 123).

"One interactional purpose of empathic behaviour is to act and communicate in such a way that the other person feels understood. To achieve this, one must understand the situation and emotions of the other person first. Empathy is therefore a process of specific understanding, emotional relating, and focused interaction" (Altmann & Roth, 2013).

Objectives of the Study

In view of the above discussion, it is apparent that present pandemic crisis has dynamically transformed our work

organization and accordingly, these new norms at the workplace are taking its toll on the employees. Most of the research studies highlight that one in two employees is in a state of psychological distress, suffering from low morale, loss of motivation and disengagement. The present study aims at finding out how did the leadership at the top globally use empathy as a prosocial skill to manage the mental well-being of their respective employees, keep them motivated and engaged for meaningful performance.

Theoretical Framework

Empathy: A Multidimensional Phenomenon

Empathy is an important concept and well researched topic that has developed through the past century, along with disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, medicine, and neuroscience. From psychological and biological point of view, empathy is the basis of successful interpersonal relationship which makes it very significant for the welfare of both individuals and society, although, certain negative aspects of empathy also exist. Different studies pointed out different concepts of empathy and its definition, either affective or cognitive empathy, but integrating both components is crucial for understanding empathy as a whole. Some studies claim uncertainties are still present in understanding of the phenomenon, and empathy overlaps with some aspects of other similar phenomena like emotional contagion, sympathy and compassion. Hall and Schwartz (2018) found that empathy is viewed as a multidimensional concept divisible into dimensions, facets, factors, types, subscales, substrates, processes, aspects, etc. Thus, it becomes imperative to avoid using empathy in general terms for better understanding, instead it should be used as “the specific terms of dispositional empathy, empathic experience, and empathic process to specify which construct is being referred to” (Duan and Hill, 1996). First, some level of empathy (both as a need and as an expressed behavior) seems to be present in all people. Evolutionary psychology and leadership studies have shown that empathy provides a bedrock behavior for everyone (Illies et al., 2006) and that leader use of empathy in the workplace creates positive states in followers (Gillet, 2010; Owens & Hekman, 2012) and the leaders themselves (Boyatzis et al., 2006). From an evolutionary perspective, empathy provides a competitive advantage because it helps someone predict who he or she can trust, how to interact with that person, and who to avoid because of they pose a possible threat. It also provided a means for people to connect and develop networks of partners who could trust each other to cooperate in mutual survival (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Dunbar, Barrett, & Lycett, 2005). Empathy—the expression of emotional support—also acted as a signal that

someone was likely trustworthy and could be counted on to consider someone else’s best interests rather than merely her or his own (Dunbar et al., 2005; Wilson, 2000).

Main Components of Empathy

Renowned psychologist Goleman (1995) observed that empathy is one of the five key components of emotional intelligence—a vital leadership skill. It develops through three stages: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy and compassionate empathy that Paul Ekman refers as empathic concerns. An affective phenomenon (affective empathy), refers to the immediate experience of the emotions of the other person they are interacting with. Emotional empathy makes someone well-attuned to another person’s inner emotional world. It’s not just a matter of knowing how someone feels, but of creating genuine rapport with them. Anyone leading a team will benefit from developing at least some emotional empathy. It helps to build trust between managers and team members, and to develop honesty and openness.

Second component is called cognitive empathy referring to the intellectual understanding of others experience. It essentially involves perspective-taking, which is the capacity to consider the world from another person’s point of view. It need not involve any emotional engagement by the observer. Managers may find cognitive empathy useful in understanding how their team members are feeling, and accordingly pitch their behaviour in such a way that ensure productivity.

A third view called Compassionate or Empathic concern that contains both affective and cognitive components is the kind of empathy that encourages people to act and is the motivation behind reducing the sufferings of another individual. It involves not only having concern for another person, and sharing their emotional pain, but also taking practical steps to reduce it.

Since, the main focus of the current study is to determine the empathic concerns of the leaders towards the well-being of their followers, therefore, the questionnaire so directed to the corporate were based on the Compassionate Empathy theory since a leader is required to display both the cognitive as well as affective empathic skills at the workplace along with related action to that effect to make empathy most valuable attribute.

Mental Health Well-Being

Over the years, the concept of mental health has continued to evolve. It implies a state of well-being in which the individual "can fulfil himself with his abilities, overcome the difficulties of everyday life, cope with stress" while making his positive contribution to his community. Good mental health affects our feelings, our emotions and can impact our lifestyle or even our relationship to work. There are several

mental health theories, but they all come from one of five schools of thought. They are behaviourism, biological, psychodynamic, cognitive, and humanistic. Together, these five schools of thought that attempt to explain mental health are more appropriate for counsellors or therapists who take guidance and rely on them to a great extent for treating their respective clients who may be suffering from some serious mental health conditions. Consequently, these theories may not be of much help to the managers or the leaders in dealing with mental issues of the working professionals since their sole objective is to ensure the latter remain engaged and committed to job performance and will work on encouraging his motivation levels. Strictly speaking, they are not qualified to offer them any therapeutic cure except learn how to motivate them.

However, in recent years, there has been a shift toward studying employee well-being from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) developed by Ryan and Deci (2000) since it generates some interesting insights about the work motivation. While there are many theories about work motivation and engagement, SDT is unique in its focus on the “relative strength of autonomous versus controlled motivation, rather than on the total amount of motivation” (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Although the overall amount of motivation is certainly a factor, it’s important not to lose sight of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators; for example, SDT is correct in its assumption that extrinsic rewards are related to reduced intrinsic motivation. It refers to psychological needs, and prosocial impact on the employee. Self-determination theory (SDT) as developed by Ryan and Deci (2000) is based on the assumptions that human beings actively respond to their world, are naturally inclined toward growth and development, and have a set of basic psychological needs that are culturally universal. These innate needs include autonomy (sense of volition), competence (sense of efficacy), and social relatedness (sense of caring relationships). SDT theory posit that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the primary supports for well-being and optimal functioning and their satisfaction is thought to be critical for human development and well-being. Social contexts that support the satisfaction of these

needs facilitate intrinsic motivation and consequently natural growth processes. Contexts that interfere with them are associated with poorer motivation, performance, and well-being.

As the objective of the present study is to find out how the empathic leadership addressed the issue of their employees wellbeing to ensure positive functioning of employees, therefore, the question statements so posed to the corporate were based on self-determination theory (SDT).

Literature Review

Many research studies post COVID-19 consensually agree that majority of people have suffered from some mental health issue like loneliness, depression, or feeling of abandonment. Research studies during the initial phase of COVID-19 have reported that employees are urgently in need of accessible, equitable mental health benefits now more than ever (Mayer, 2020). Multiple reasons have been for their suffering and associated risk factors affecting mental health of employees can be summarized as in the Table 1.

Thus, it's time for leaders to rebuild the bonds with their employees that COVID-19 has shaken. Many business leaders are convinced that large-scale change is necessary to bounce back from difficult times. Display of empathic leadership during crisis has been proven to be a potential weapon to mitigate the impact of crisis to a great extent. As one of the variable used in this study is empathic leadership, substantial studies on the subject were found to be available in the literature, although most of these studies are dedicated to defining the conceptual understanding of empathy. However, there are some studies done focussing on empathic leadership and a few on the negative aspects of empathy. These studies are highlighted in the Tables 2, 3, 4 as given below.

It is evident from these studies that the construct of empathy is still open to many interpretations and definitions. There is no firm definition of empathy despite organizational interest in empathy. However, based on the cumulative interdisciplinary body of research on empathy, it is consensually agreed (except for few exceptions) by all that empathy is

Table 1 Research studies on factors affecting mental health of employees

Study	Key findings	Risk factors affecting mental health
Brooks et al. (2020), Xiang et al. (2019)	People suffer from the perception of safety, threat and risk of contagion due to pandemic	Unsafe workplaces and risk of contagion
Zhou et al. (2020)	COVID -19 pandemic cause financial loss and job insecurity	Financial loss and Job insecurity
Gao et al. (2020), Garfin et al. (2020)	Pandemic leads to overloading of information and uncertainty	Information Uncertainty
Qiu et al. (2020)	Pandemic can instill the fear of being quarantined and confinement	Loss of creative zeal due to fear of being Quarantined and confinements

Table 2 Studies on defining of empathy as a concept

Author	Year	Findings
Feshbach	1978	Empathy involves the cognitive process of identifying another's emotion
Barrett Lennard	1981	Viewed as an interpersonal process and individual ability
Batson et al., Smith et al.,	1991 1989	It is not clear if positive empathy motivates prosocial behavior or if it is otherway round
Salovey & Mayer	1990	The ability and propensity to sense the feelings of people in emotional distress and to re-experience these feelings oneself
Andreoini	1990	Positive empathy involves positive emotions that reinforces prosociality
Bass & Avolio	1990	Traditionally has been associated with greater prosocial behavior, better task performance, greater perceptions of justice, and greater communication competence
Davis	1994	It is important to differentiate empathy and sympathy from cognitive perspective taking and related cognitive processes
Eisenberg et al., Hoffman	1994 2000	An effective response more appropriate to another's situation than one's own
Fredrickson	2001	Positive emotions promote social bonding, making people more open to connecting and engaging with others
Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth	2002	Empathy encourages prosocial behavior
Andreoini and Miller	2002	Positive empathy generates positive emotions leading to prosociality
Mercer Maxwell; Heaney & Watt	2004	As interpersonal behavior
Loewenstein	2005	People high in positivity relate to others' positive experiences better since both are experiencing similar affective state
Hall and Schwartz	2018	Empathy is viewed as a multidimensional concept divisible into dimensions, facets, factors, types, subscales, substrates, processes, aspects, etc
Longmire and Harrison	2018	"Empathic concern is an emotional response to another's hardship
Crumpler and Grossman	2008	Warm glow and positive empathy can drive helping behavior
Moreilli and Lieberman	2013	
Shamay-Tsoory; Aharon-Peretz & Perry	2009	response or reaction to observing another's experiences
Williams; O'Driscoll, & Moore	2014	An ability to understand or experience the feelings of others and displaying a prosocial behavior towards people
Riess	2015	As capacity or competency
Morelli, Lieberman; Telzer and Zaki	2015	Understanding and vicariously sharing others positive emotions Uniquely leads to prosocial behaviour, sense of social connection and subjective well being
Lindsey, King, Hebl, and Levine	2015	"Empathy is a dispositional construct that captures the capacity to understand others' emotions and experiences"

a multilevel construct having three distinct dimensions of empathy).

- (a) understanding another person's internal state (cognitive empathy),
- (b) sharing another person's affective state (affective empathy), and
- (c) behaviourally demonstrating that one has understood another person's internal state and/or shared another person's affective state (behavioural/compassionate empathy).

Thus it can be inferred from these varied definitions that empathy is a complex and multidimensional construct comprised of cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, has been advanced as a critical predictor of prosocial behaviour and effectiveness in the workplace. Table 3 as given below highlights studies on leadership and empathy.

These studies attempt to define empathic leadership that is characterized by prosocial behaviour which is inclusive of expressing emotional support and concern for followers' well-being. Besides, some of the studies also indicate that empathic leadership influences performance through job satisfaction and innovative behaviour. Hence, to be a successful and an effective leader, empathy is rated as the most essential quality of the apex leadership.

Notwithstanding, these studies on negative aspects of empathy are small in number, but these do reflect another perspective that goes contrary to the popular and positive view of empathy. It is observed by these authors cited that an excessive use of empathic communication can at times lead to impair an individual and organizational performance and their judgement. It is noted that the jobs that require constant empathy can lead to "compassion fatigue. Thus emotional management of employees with empathy is simultaneously one of the greatest challenges and opportunities for

Table 3 Studies on the Relationship between Leadership and Empathy

Authors	Year	Findings
Christianson, Farkas, Sutcliffe, & Weick,	2009	Leaders with greater empathy are better equipped to manage those who experience these emotions
James et al.,	2011	
Kahn et al.,	2013	
Vuori & Huy	2016	
Gentry, Weber, and Sadri	2016	“Empathy is a construct that is fundamental to leadership
Bell & Hall	1954	Empathic leaders create a powerful bond that encourages and sustains followers in endeavors needed for improving workplace performance
Holt & Marques	2012	
Kock; Mayfield; Mayfield; Sexton; and Garza	2019	Leader empathy increases performance by increasing follower job satisfaction and fostering innovation
Barbuto, Ottfredson, & Searle	2014	Servant Leadership, while mostly focusing on placing follower concerns before their own, servant leaders must also care for followers’ emotional well-being, and express these concerns in concrete communicative ways
Barbuto & Wheeler	2006	
Bakar & McCann	2018	
Gutierrez-Wirsching, Mayfield, Mayfield, & Wang	2015	
J. Mayfield & Mayfield	1995	
Baron & Parent	2015	Authentic leadership requires that leaders express their emotional support and concern for followers’ well-being and emotional support
Duan	2000	Empathy is the most essential quality of leaders to motivate
Elliott; Bohart, Watson, & Greenberg	2011	Consisting of a variety of different acts used in different ways like one can put oneself into the shoes of the other: emotionally, cognitively, on a moment-to-moment basis, or by trying to grasp an overall sense of what it is like to be that person
Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson	2008	Authentic and transformational leaders make an effort to understand their people, harbor deep respect for their co-workers, and also show them that they care for their needs and achievement
Bass and Avolio	1990	
Adhariani, Sciulli, & Clift	2017	Leader must consider a follower’s contextual circumstances such as her or his emotional state and needs
Liu & Buzzanell	2004	
Gutierrez Wirsching et al.,	2015	Communicating support for a follower’s emotions has a positive influence on follower outcomes (in a wide variety of settings)
J. Mayfield & Mayfield	2009	
Judge, Heller, & Mount	2002	Empathetic leadership influences performance through job satisfaction and innovative behavior

Table 4 Studies on the negative impact of excessive empathy

Author	Year	Findings
Bloom	2016	empathy might also trigger cognitive overload, exhaustion, bias, and even aggressive behavior
Waytz	2016	It is noted that the jobs that require constant empathy can lead to “compassion fatigue”—a state of emotional, mental, physical, and occupational exhaustion, draining one’s energy and cognitive resources
Stebnicki	2007	
Waytz	2016	those who fail to recognize the limits of empathy can ‘impair performance’ and ‘erode ethics’
Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough	2009	strongly empathic leaders might “not make good leaders (probably because they are unable to take a stand on difficult matters, are submissive, and put individual interests ahead of organizational interests)”
Batson et al.,	1991	Not sure if positive empathy triggers pro-sociality or it is the prosocial disposition of the person that makes him/her empathic
Smith et al.,	1989	

leaders—at all levels—in the middle of any crisis. Empathic concern should be important to the point that its presence or absence makes or breaks organisational functions. As this study aims at investigating the top-down influence of manager empathy on employee well-being, the studies on the subject were not found in great numbers. This topic still

needs to be explored in-depth as is evident from Table 5 given below.

The studies above substantiate that leaders should be aware that they have an essential role in managing positively the emotions of their teams especially when they are suffering from mental health issues and feeling low in

Table 5 Current research trends on well-being concept

Author	Year	Findings
Scott; Colquitt; Paddock & Judge	2010	Group of employees with empathic managers experienced lower average levels of somatic complaints, and daily goal progress was more strongly related to positive affect for groups of employees with empathic managers
Gable et al.,	2004	Constructive response of an empathic individual are likely to intensify the employee's positive feelings
George	2000	Leaders who can understand and manage the emotions within their units may therefore be better able to improve the well-being and functioning of those units
Diener et al.,	1999	Poor health may harm subjective wellbeing "because it interferes with the attainment of important goals"
Zohar	1999	Found that daily hassles, which disrupt goal-directed behaviour, were associated with negative mood
Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine	2007	Indeed, physical symptoms have been linked to higher levels of work withdrawal
Halbesleben	2006	Support has a direct effect on strain and
Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau	1975	Conceptualizations of supervisor support emphasize doing things to make work life easier, being easy to talk to, being reliable, and being willing to listen. Empathy may therefore stand as a dispositional predictor of supervisor support behaviours
Nielsen, Randall, Yarker & Brenner	2008	Followers' perceptions of their work characteristics did mediate the relationship between transformational leadership style and psychological well-being That leaders stir up emotions, both positive and negative and that there is a strong association between leaders' empathy and emotions whereby the former acts as mediator; the generated negative emotions, in turn, stir up negative markers of employees' well-being
Lazarus & Smith	1990	Because the kind of emotions one experiences influence how one acts in response to an event, provoking an impact on one's well-being, physical health, social behavior and performance
Dietz & Kleinogel	2014	In critical situations for organizations, empathic leaders being sensitive to the well-being of their teams, have the ability to make decisions without undermining the well-being of the organization as a whole
Macdonald	2008	
Young et al.,	2017	Empathy may improve managerial effectiveness and employee well-being, if it is applied correctly
Eisenberger et al.,		a positive relationship between team members and leaders gives employees more confidence, increases their accountability and produces more commitment
Somogyi et al.,	2013	Empathy is an important feature for the well-being of their teams and the organization as a whole

spirit. Research suggests that empathy is positively related to well-being of employees. Hence, the authors opine that there should be a visible display of positive emotions at the work place to stir up positive behaviour from their employees, as negative emotions will trigger negative behaviour. Besides, these studies also reveal that empathic leaders will avoid controlling the behaviours of their employees, on the contrary they will give them creative freedom to perform their jobs, thereby, bolstering their confidence and belief in themselves. The empathic leadership, according to one of the study unravels support inclusive culture where each member of the team or department feels connected to other members and enjoys healthy relationship with his co-workers or boss.

Although the theme of exploring the relationship between compassionate empathic leadership and employee well-being has received attention from the researchers in recent times but, unfortunately there are not substantial studies available on the same. Again, as is evident from the literature that empathy may improve managerial effectiveness and

employee well-being, therefore, this combination of themes acquires special importance and relevance in the present scenario especially after unprecedented crisis of the COVID-19 that has impacted the social-economic sectors and the industries badly world over. In view of its importance, not many studies are found exploring the theme of compassionate empathic leadership and employee well-being post the pandemic. There are few studies that touch upon employee well-being but it is explored in relation to occupational hazards, (Prasada et al., 2020); responsible leadership (meaning honesty, integrity, trust) and organizational sustainability (Hoque et al., 2020). There are a few more studies on leadership investigating leadership competencies (meaning sense maker; technology enabler; innovative communication, etc.) and the essential role of human resource development in times of crisis (Dirani et al., 2020). Thus, in the times of unprecedented crisis, the study on the topic of compassionate empathic leadership and the employee well-being is much required for the survival of an organization.

Research Methodology

Design, Sampling, and Data Collection

As the study was qualitative in design, therefore, the data so collected to seek answers to the questions so raised was done through interviewing apex leadership from the corporate, representing different business segments from across the world. A questionnaire was prepared having 10 statements based on the theories of compassionate empathic leadership and employee well-being. The questionnaire was deliberately restricted to ten (10) statements only because of paucity of time and the busy schedules of the apex leadership who would be unwilling and reluctant to answer long list of questions. Nevertheless, it was ensured that these statements are complete in capturing all aspects of compassionate empathic theory and employee well-being. Initially twenty (20) c-suite executives from different sectors were approached telephonically as well as through e-mails seeking their participation in the said project. However, out of twenty, it was only seven of them who responded positively and showed their willingness to participate in the said project. These C-Suite executives were from diverse industrial backgrounds such as IT services, Knit dying manufacturing, real estates, food supply chain, telecom, petroleum and process industries. There were two major reasons for approaching corporate from different sectors and different geographical locations:

(a) Since the COVID-19 pandemic has hit almost every sector of the economy all over the world. No single organization in the world could escape the impact of this outbreak. Therefore, the experience of this pandemic was globally common to all sectors and managements except it varied in terms of the severity of the impact. Thus the data so received from them will match the objective of the study

(b) Secondly, it was difficult to get access to top leadership from one sector only and that too from domestic segment. Thus, in view of limited choices, it was decided to involve leadership from all economic sectors globally as it can give us a glimpse how leadership from different zones and sectors managed this unprecedented crisis. Though, it will not be appropriate to generalize and draw conclusions from the outcome of study based on these miniscule data. Nevertheless, at least it can give us some clue with respect to differences in the leadership styles from different geographical locations.

Once, the leadership from the said sectors were identified and they committed their partaking, a virtual meeting was arranged independently with each one of them where the objective of the study was explained to them. Additionally, before virtual meeting, the question statements were already emailed to them and in the V meeting, each question statement was explained to them in depth as to what each statement entails thereby ensuring that there is no gap in understanding the text or sub text of the statements. So, an oral validation of the questionnaire was sought from the target sample. Since, it was the initial and first wave of the COVID-19, all these leaders identified were deeply involved in the company affairs struggling to minimize the impact, expressed their inability to answer the questions in one sitting. They also expressed their desire to avoid the telephonic interview since they were not sure if they could justify the answers given in a short specific time. Subsequently, they requested that they be given time to think through the questions and respond in writing so that they do not miss out any details, if so, could be incorporated later, in the written document. Hence, they all responded by sending their replies in writing. The same is attached in the Annexure 1 in ESM. Thus, the primary data were drawn primarily from the structured interviews of the seven top leaders from the diverse industrial backgrounds as details are given below in Table 6.

Table 6 Brief profile of industry leaders who participated in the study

	Industry expert	Designation	Region	Sector	Firm type
IE1	ABR	Director Technology Platform	USA	IT services	MNEs
IE2	ANT	GM-Design and Product Development	Bangladesh	Knit and dyeing manufacturing	MNEs
IE3	ARB	MD, HVAC-	South Asia Pacific Region	HVAC and appliance manufacturing	MNEs
IE4	PRJ	Chief Operating officer	India	Food Supply Network	Domestic Giant
IE5	RAP	MD, Property Management	India, South East Asia, Middle East and North Africa	Real Estate Industry	MNEs
IE6	RAR	Chief Technology officer	India	Telecom Industry	MNEs
IE7	SAW	Chief Supply Chain and Manufacturing Officer	Asia	Petroleum Industry	MNEs

Table 7 Emerging themes reflected in the study

Themes	Excerpts from the industry experts
Compassionate Empathic Behaviour	<p>Industrial expert (IE1, see annexure p.1): “ I have witnessed a shift in communications towards more empathy and authenticity.HR created dedicated internal org-wide communication channels for employees to discuss their day to day challenges with the Work from Home (WFH) model.” IE-3 (annexure p.4) “leadership with head, heart and hands: empathy becomes the key leadership trait given interpersonal relationships are changed in a remote setting, leaders were encouraged to embrace the responsibility to model the required behaviours to communicate more frequently, to build the trust and relationships and take feedback”</p> <p>IE-4 (annexure p.5) “We at ... decided to support the fund by an amount equal to the collection made enabling them to provide 50 K +ration Kits in the first 3 months across 30 + cities along with emergency medical support to the drivers and their families for 900 + ailments for hospitalisation in 40 + cities. We provided Covid Insurance to 0.5 million drivers across 110 + cities.” IE-5(annexure p.7), we were swift in implementing the shift for business continuity. Our first priority was to safeguard our people, ensuring their immediate health and safety, followed by economic wellbeing</p> <p>IE-6 (annexure p.9) “We have managed the transition by respecting each employee’s circumstances while working from home, recognising that operating out of home is not the same as operating from office, and that the boundaries of personal and professional has got merged, especially during lockdown when people were doing all the household chores while managing office work. Dedicated Covid page on intranet with updated advisories based on credible health institutions, information sharing during team calls, Covid war-room to address employee concerns”</p>
Open, Honest and Timely Vertical Communication Promotes Trust and Bonding	<p>IE-5 (annexure p.8) ““As a leader, the essence of communication strongly falls on being real and transparent. These are powerful tools that allow you to be empathetic and understand points of views that are vastly different from yours”</p> <p>IE-6 (annexure p.9) “it was important to keep a steady frequency of communication with employees and teams to avoid rumours and misinformation and to ensure people have the right information to keep themselves safe... The communication has to be at a multiple-levels – leadership communications, line-manager communications”, IE-7(annexure p.10) “Communication was key factor during this period. Various channels of formal and informal communication were used to keep everyone in good emotional state despite stressful times. IE-4 (annexure p.6),we reinforce our communication and connect strategy, which in turn involved, being transparent and honest in our communications at all times and also connecting frequently through various platforms – 1–0-1 s, team meetings, newsletters etc. we made following changes by firstly launching a communication tool which connects upwards and peer level interactions</p>
Support for Employee Autonomy	<p>IE-7 (annexure p.10) “This meant more trust on your teams who you were not able to meet physically and empower them to execute the things”</p> <p>IE-1 (annexure p. 1) At...HR created dedicated internal org-wide communication channels for employees to discuss their day to day challenges with the Work from Home (WFH) model. I conducted end of week check-ins over Slack, an internal chat tool, to get a pulse of my team members while HR started conducting monthly pulse voice of employee surveys to understand the employees’ feedback and concerns and their willingness to come back to office</p> <p>IE-3 (annexure p. 4)” Regular communication with emphasis on giving employees the choice to work from home or in office basis their comfort. Move from managing to enabling: Encourage flexible working, trust and empower teams to create ownership culture with focus on outcome and not activities”</p> <p>IE-4 (annexure p.4) “ensuring the safety of employees by promoting WFH”</p> <p>IE-6 (annexure p.8)” For us it has been respect and renewal. We have managed the transition by respecting each employees’ circumstances while working from home, recognising that operating out of home is not the same as operating from office”</p> <p>IE-3 (annexure p3). Move from managing to enabling: Encourage flexible working, trust and empower teams to create ownership culture with focus on outcome and not activities</p>

Table 7 (continued)

Themes	Excerpts from the industry experts
Encouraging Competence and self-efficacy in Employees	<p>IE-3.(annexure p.4)” Remote working was new for most of the employees which has impact on their physical and mental health and hence communication was done to create awareness on the subject, impart trainings on subjects like Working from home, Workstation Ergonomics @Home, creating boundaries between work and home, remote selling skillsets”</p> <p>IE-6 (annexure p. 8) “Employees across the globe should have same information, customised to their regional requirements and as per regulations, at the same time to avoid rumours”</p>
Promoting Positive and Healthy Relationships	<p>IE-3 (annexure p.3) “Empathy becomes the key leadership trait given interpersonal relationships are changed in a remote setting, leaders were encouraged to embrace the responsibility to model the required behaviours to communicate more frequently, to build the trust and relationships and take feedback.” IE-4 (annexure p. 5) “To ease WFH we communicated frequently with employees across work and outside of work. Firstly, we ensured cadence around all hands/ morning catch ups—this brought everyone in a team/project together and on the same page, also solving for clarifications, interdependencies, concerns, conflicts, if any and bringing more work clarity across the group” IE-5” My team and employees are the biggest assets of my organisation, and I ensure I communicate with them time and again through virtual calls, meetings, training sessions and sometimes also check up on their well-being. I am certain that this is just a phase and we will overcome all challenges, but I would want to do it with all my team members being in good health” We have also gone the extra mile to support our staff through regular virtual meetups, where we encourage conversations other than work, such as discussing hobbies, recommendations about books and series, new ideas, and other topics</p> <p>IE-6 (annexure p. 10) “dedicated COVID control centre—all hands call, Yam-jam sessions, frequent video calls within smaller teams for coffee connect “</p>
Compassionate Empathy Positively Impacts Organizational Performance during Crisis	<p>IE-2 (annexure p.3) “We all managed to evolve and have rather been able to make a visible impact with all our customers”</p> <p>IE-4 (annexure p.6) “ Fortunately for us, the business is recovering well, and some markets / verticals have already recovered to pre-COVID levels. The general feeling of employees on org response to pandemic is positive as we could keep its business afloat without causing much impact on employees”</p> <p>IE-5 (annexure p. 8) “Being empathetic “...” increased productivity and better performance”</p> <p>IE-1 (annexure p.1) “From a results standpoint, it feels that business has returned to normal</p>

Data Analysis and Discussion

The predominant themes that emerged from the cross analysis of the data as collected from the varied corporate heads are shown in Table 7 as below.

The following Figure 1 explains how during crisis, a combination of strategic communication and compassion empathic leadership will ensure the well-being of its people by granting them that sense of freedom to operate, encouraging in them a feeling of self-efficacy and most importantly connecting with them both at emotional as well as at cognitive levels that results in an engaged and motivated workforce that in turn translates into enhanced performance.

It is evident from the responses of varied apex leadership representing different sectors and different geographical locations that they have been completely knocked off

the balance by this unexpected global economic disruption. The initial phase of COVID-19 has been chaotic for leaders grappling with an unpredictable business environment on one hand and concern for employee safety on the other hand. The abrupt shift for many companies from physical to virtual interaction unfolded many challenges for the management including the lack of infrastructure, deploying digital technologies, besides managing employees’ anxiety and distress related to job insecurity, financial loss or perception of safety. Although, both Medallia or Nokia (IE1; IE6, see annexure p. 1; p.8) has a flexible work culture and the digital and security infrastructure was already in place; a little scaling of that infrastructure made pivoting to a 100% Work-From-Home (WFH) workforce easy while as most of the companies have to struggle to update security and digital infrastructure. The inference from the data drawn however contradicts the findings of

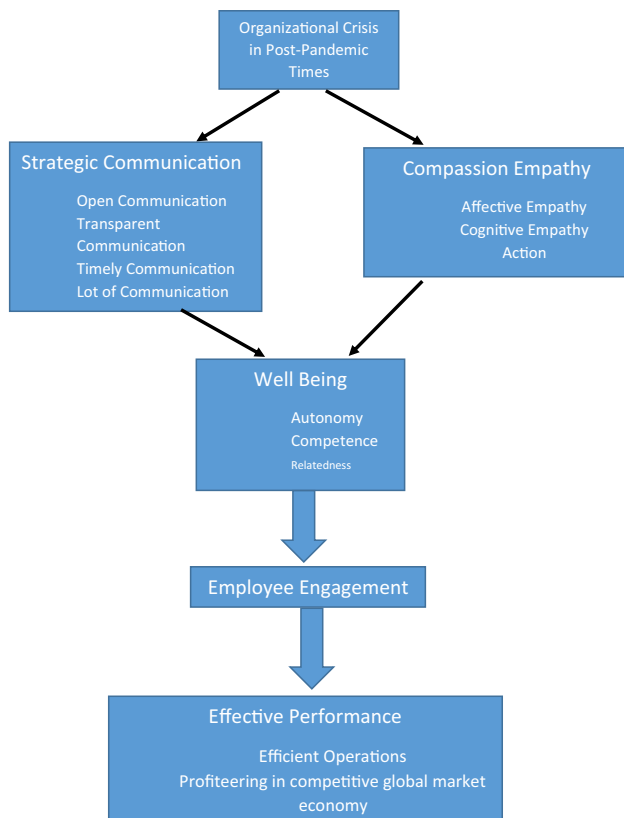


Fig. 1 Leveraging emphatic communication in post-pandemic crisis

earlier studies that posits that strongly empathic leaders might “not make good leaders probably because they are unable to take a stand on difficult matters, are submissive, and put individual interests ahead of organizational interests” (Antonakis et al., 2009), while as the present study unravels that effective leaders draw upon their ability to identify and express emotions in order to better understand and influence their followers (compassionate empathy), to convey a compelling vision, to maintain excitement, and to promote interpersonal cooperation “to make a visible impact with all our customers.” (IE5; see annexure pp. 6 & 7). Further, some studies that advocated “it is noted that the jobs that require constant empathy can lead to “compassion fatigue”—a state of emotional, mental, physical, and occupational exhaustion, draining one’s energy and cognitive resources “also stands rejected “Pandemic or not, this has been the way of life at OLA, hence no emotional fatigue was there for the leaders” (IE4; see annexure pp. 5 & 6). The findings of this study, in fact, strongly support that “emotionally expressive leaders were, in fact, more effective” (Groves, 2006:172). The study also unravels during this pandemic crisis, the studied leadership also realized that “a greater degree of empathy was needed as safety (health) and security (job) concerns were high among the employees (IE6; see annexure p. 8),

hence they all shared” information in timely and accurate manner, through appropriate internal channels” (IE5; see annexure pp. 6 & 7), and “Various channels of formal and informal communication were used to keep everyone in good emotional state despite stressful times” (IE7; see annexure p. 10). Consequently, they” took multiple measures to reach out to our employees and allay their fears especially with regard to their losing jobs,” (IE3; see annexure p. 3); “as their jobs will not be impacted and these assurances keep directly from the top leadership (IE1, see annexure p.1) thereby, validating “managers need to send clear, precise and timely job instructions, communicate constructive feedback., and use multiple channels of communication ... will enhance job commitment and reduce the likelihood of employees leaving their organizations.” (Raina & Roebuck, 2016; Appelbaum, 2009). It was also found that the said leaders collectively believed that for continual improvements, “Developing competencies, embracing social purpose’ (IE4; see annexure pp. 5 & 6) and “Building capabilities within our teams, in our offerings, in our systems and in our partners. (Capability building) (IE1; IE5; see annexure p.1 & pp. 6 & 7) was required. “My challenge was to groom my team into presenting virtually (IE2; see annexure p. 2)”. They were assured their respective employees to carry on their personal and professional life, giving them that most valued sense of freedom to operate at their will. Besides, each company “During times of crisis.....it is crucial for everybody to stay connected and be engaged” (IE4; see annexure pp. 5 & 6)“, hence “Tools like Microsoft Teams, the Yammer, WhatsApp groups, yoga etc., were used to have social interactions by sharing their activities during lockdown with their colleagues” (IE1; IE4; IE7; IE5; see annexure pp. 1; 5 & 6; pp. 10 & 11; pp. 6 & 7). This sentiment is echoed in the study by Argenti (2002, p. 139). “Today’s employees do want high-tech and sophisticated communications, but they also want personal contact with their managers. Understanding this fact is the cornerstone of an effective internal communication system.”

Conclusions

Finally, inferences drawn from the data so received in the form of interviews indicate that all these leader’s/decision makers by adopting a compassionate empathic attitude, understood their employees’ needs for well-being, psychological safety, and engagement and thus gave primacy to their needs. They took all measures, in word and action to ensure both the physical safety as well as mental well-being of their employees. All the channels of communication were activated to keep them well informed and engaged. These testimonials directly from the apex leadership reiterate the

fact that “a strong communication strategy is one of the pillars of success for an organization”. As IE-6 (see annexure p. 8) puts it “Our communication has not only been restricted to solving specific problems but also providing a larger context and perspective which has helped deliver exceptional results.” Right from providing unified Communication platform, to displaying empathic leadership, these apex leaderships unanimously believe that people are their best assets and if managed well in this crisis, we can come out successfully through this storm as stated by IE-7 (see annexure pp. 10 & 11. “Fortunately, our business is recovering faster than anticipated during the peak of the pandemic” (IE4; see annexure pp 5 & 6).

Thus, to stay profitable in the highly challenging and competitive global market economy, it is important to manage all factors at production including people, machines and materials. But managing manpower takes the precedence over everything. The present scenario demands of the leadership to place greater emphasis on building and maintaining relationships. Leaders today need to be more person focused and be aware of the needs and aspirations of each and every person working at the bottom of the pyramid. This study found that the ability to take genuine perspective and understand what others are feeling is a skill that clearly contributes to effective leadership, thereby, placing an even greater value on empathy as a leadership skill. The study also highlights a striking connection between empathy and performance. Besides, effective organizational communication plays an important role in this challenge as it is the channel through which information, instructions policies etc. are communicated. Leaders who create a transparent, positive and participative communication environment can impact operations and product improvement in very positive ways.

Key Theoretical Contributions

The insights gained from the inputs from top leaders further validates some of the theories as forwarded by earlier studies on leadership communication, compassionate empathic leadership and employee wellbeing and organizational performance. The insights of leaders across these companies unanimously confessed that “a strong communication strategy is one of the pillars of success for an organization”. This is echoed in large number of research studies in addition to Barrett (2006), Raina (2010), Jaskyte (2004), Walumbwa et al. (2005) who also endorse that effective leadership is all about communicating effectively responsively, frequently, honestly and timely, using multiple levels of communication backed by perfectly planned and dedicated communication policies give job satisfaction, builds trusts and encourage not only employees but other stake holders to trust their organizations. The present study also highlights that effective leaders draw upon their ability to identify and express

emotions to better understand and influence followers, to convey a compelling vision, to maintain excitement, and to promote interpersonal cooperation the most vital trait for CEOs to manage organizational crisis, especially interpersonal relationships that are changed in new normal times, among many other qualities is empathy. This finding finds support in studies by Boin et al. (2005), Coombs (2015), Coombs and Holladay (2005), King (2007), Seeger (2006), Wooten and James (2008). It is said when crisis occurs in an organization, employees are prone to feel strong emotions such as anxiety, panic, and distress (James et al., 2011; Kayes, 2004; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Weick, 1990, 1993) and that leaders with greater empathy are better equipped to manage those who experience these emotions (Christianson et al., 2009; James et al., 2011; Kahn et al., 2013; Vuori & Huy, 2016). It has also been established in previous research articles that leadership involves a process of managing and influencing their subordinates’ feelings of frustration and feelings of optimism, which in turn influenced objective sales performance (Kock et al., 2019; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Pescosolido, 2002). The present case study also illustrates that it was emotional faculties and cognitive abilities oKukule (2012) in” Internal communication crisis and its impact on organization’s performance” cited that the importance of symmetry has been marked by Gruning and Hunt, describing symmetric communication as a source and a recipient which cannot be separated but are equal participants of a communication process seeking (striving for) mutual understanding and proportional two-way effect (Grunig & Grunig, 1989). The research work, carried out under the auspices of the paper, points at the lack of symmetric approach in internal communication, which is marked by the research participants (not representing the dominant coalition) as an important cause of the problem and of crisis in the organization. He opined that lack of leadership, unclear managerial style and incomprehension of employees’ need for information created a fundamental problem in the organization’s internal communication. Furthermore, the role of informal communication and “grape-vine telegraph” in an organization’s communication is viewed as one of crucial factors influencing organization’s operations and may become a threat to an organization. He further suggested that organizational crisis may not only be caused by external conditions which are difficult to control for an organization, but also by internal factors which are closely linked to communication problems in the organization. The task leadership that companies have been able to recover their businesses to a great extent.

Limitations and Future Scope

The major limitation of this study has been the small sample size. Therefore, it will not be appropriate to draw

generalizations based on the insights from these leaders, though the outcome of the study gives us some glimpse how the leadership from different locations approached and addressed the COVID related problem of their respective employees' well-being. Besides, the major limitation of the study has been the lack of scientific validation of the data. However, initially this study was conceived and developed as a perspective paper. The idea was to explore if the emotional support from the leadership can restore the confidence, sense of security and well-being among the followers. But, nevertheless, one can always take up a new study using larger sample size followed by content analysis or other related analysis to make the study more scientific. Another limitation of this study is that it did not include the employees' point of view that could have provided their side of the story and also could have confirmed or negated the narrative as presented by the leaders in the study. The study throws open many new ideas or themes for future research like scope of the paper can be further enriched by adding on few more variables like performance, organizational culture, occupational hazards etc.

Key Questions Reflecting Real Life Applications

- Q1 How does open, transparent vertical communication impacts the well-being of employees?
- Q2 Can constant empathy lead to compassion fatigue?
- Q3 Do emotionally expressive leaders promote interpersonal cooperation?
- Q4 Does organizational culture that supports the well-being of its employees facilitate intrinsic motivation and effective performance?
- Q5 How does effective organizational communication impact operations and product in a company?
- Q6 Does timely and complete exchange of information between the senior and the subordinate generate trust between the two?
- Q7 Is it true that leaders/managers need to pay special attention to the mental/physical well-being of their employees during crisis and ensure that they feel secure and safe?

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