The quality of empathy has been pointed to as indispensible to executive leadership for decades. In this context, empathy usually is defined as the ability to read people, to understand their needs and feelings, and to act in a way that maximizes their trust and motivation. Executives who lack empathy often suffer difficult social relations at work. They tend to be poor collaborators, have trouble with changing and ambiguous situations, and are often generally ineffective at leading others.

Empathy is part of the wider array of social dispositions and behaviors known as emotional intelligence, or EQ. EQ also includes traits such as sociability, interdependence, self-regulation, composure, and self-awareness. Along with empathy, these related yet sufficiently distinct attributes are useful predictors of executives’ likelihood of success as leaders (Bharwaney, Bar-On, and MacKinlay 2011).

In short, there is no paucity of research demonstrating the marked utility of empathy in leadership (Langelett 2014). In fact Korn Ferry research repeatedly has found that executives with high empathy are among the most successful and engaged (Lewis 2013).

More recently, however, the Korn Ferry Institute sought to model profiles of the most engaged and least engaged C-level executives. As expected, we saw high EQ across the board for the most engaged group, who were typically higher than at least 81% of managerial professionals on all social dispositions measured.

The least engaged executives scored relatively low on components of EQ except for one: empathy.
Our study of more than 2,000 managerial professionals showed that only on empathy scores did the least engaged C-level executives match the most engaged (see Figure 1). In short, the least engaged executives lead in a way that emphasizes empathy, while letting other parts of EQ take a backseat. Although they do care about people and read their emotions, they tend to be emotionally unstable themselves. They have limited self-awareness, low preference for interdependence, they aren’t particularly motivating, and they’re typically below average on measures of sociability.

Our findings suggest that decades’ of previous empirical research had failed to reveal how empathy can actually be a liability for an executive—particularly when it’s not accompanied by other components of EQ. To recognize emotions and have concern for the frustrations of others is not the same as regulating emotions or being socially skilled. Empathy must be accompanied with other social-behavioral skills in order to be an asset.

**Figure 1**

Scores on components of EQ for high- and low-engagement C-level executives.
This still leaves the question of why unengaged leaders—who are generally ineffective as well—are so tapped into the feelings of others. One thought is that although reading and understanding people is a valuable skill, accommodating them is not. Empathy is powerful when used strategically, but that requires other EQ components such as composure, presence of mind, and a considerable degree of sociability and motivational skill. Leadership also requires confrontation, courage, setting limits, and even firing employees—undertakings in which an over-empathetic person might falter. In short, EQ is a multifaceted toolbox that, when not used in harmony, can result in leadership ineffectiveness.

It is likely not advisable that leaders emphasize any single component of EQ, but our results suggest that someone with a one-dimensional empathetic style is at particularly high risk to derail.

References


About Korn Ferry

At Korn Ferry, we design, build, attract and ignite talent. Since our inception, clients have trusted us to help recruit world-class leadership. Today, we are a single source for leadership and talent consulting services to empower businesses and leaders to reach their goals. Our solutions range from executive recruitment and leadership development programs, to enterprise learning, succession planning and recruitment process outsourcing (RPO).

About The Korn Ferry Institute

The Korn Ferry Institute, our research and analytics arm, was established to share intelligence and expert points of view on talent and leadership. Through studies, books and a quarterly magazine, Briefings, we aim to increase understanding of how strategic talent decisions contribute to competitive advantage, growth and success.

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