Module 2 Scenario (what empathy is vs. is not)

Scenario:

You're a team leader at your company. A month ago, one of your high-performing team members, James, experienced the death of a relative, and since then, he has been noticeably missing some important deadlines, and just doesn't seem to be himself. You want to address this.

Role-play questions:

What would you, as an empathic leader, do to approach this situation?

    A. Thought bubble 1:
       "I'm going to wait for James to come to me instead of initiating a conversation because this is too personal a matter. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to ask him about this."

    B. Thought bubble 2:
       "I'm going to call James in for a 1:1 meeting so that we can talk about how to change his performance challenges."

    C. Thought bubble 3:
       "I'm going to call James in for a 1:1 meeting so that I can figure out how to support him."

Answer: **C**

*Feedback***:**

Empathic leadership means taking an active approach to address concerns regarding changes in employee performance, even if you think it might be related to a personal challenge; you can still offer support while maintaining healthy professional boundaries. It is always best to have a private meeting with an employee about any performance issues, and to go in with a focus on how you can best support the person, rather than solely on their performance.

James comes to your office for a private meeting. How would you start the conversation?
(James walks in the door and sits down, with the user's view facing forward through the screen, like in a real role-playing game)

    A. Word bubble 1:
       "I know your relative recently passed away, and I totally understand because I know I struggled with work when my uncle passed away last year. So, what can we do to get you back on track?"

    B. Word bubble 2:
       "I know you've been struggling since your relative passed away, and I'd like to help. What do you need from me in order to get your performance back to where it was?"

    C. Word bubble 3:
       "I've noticed that you've been struggling to meet some deadlines recently. Are you experiencing any challenges that I can help with? You can feel free to tell me about it even if it's something outside of work."

***Answer:* C**

Feedback:

Empathic leadership is most effective when also maintaining healthy professional boundaries. When it comes to personal matters, it's always best to let your employees or colleagues share if they choose to—you can open the floor for them to do so and make sure they know it's welcomed, but it's best to wait until they do. Otherwise, you can simply acknowledge what's not working, ask how you can help, and let them know it's ok to share if there's anything personal that's impacting their ability to work at full capacity.

James: Word bubble:
"Thank you, I appreciate that, but there's not anything I know of that's causing challenges for me right now. I think I've just been tired. I'll do better."

(Pop-out note: Employees might not feel comfortable talking to people at work about personal matters, or sometimes they might not even realize what's impacting them.)

How would you, as an empathic leader, respond?

A. Word bubble 1:
"Ok, I just wanted to check." (and you then drop the matter)

B. Word bubble 2:
"Do you think this could be related to your relative passing away? It seemed to start around that time. Have you tried seeking support with your grieving process from a therapist or support group?"

C. Word bubble 3:
"Ok, just know that I'm here to support you however I can. Even if there's something personal going on, I want you to know that you can talk to me about it so that we can do whatever is necessary to support you in your work."

Answer: **C**

Feedback:

The approach of an empathic leader is to let employees know that you're there for them, and that there are ways you can actively support them if they're struggling with something either inside or outside of work--even if an employee can't identify their own challenge. In many cultures, giving advice on personal issues crosses a boundary. However, simply dropping a matter after checking in usually won't solve anything. The best approach is to strike a balance of boundaries, empathy, and empathic action.

James: Word bubble: Thank you.

How would you, as an empathic leader close the conversation and address the matter at hand?

A. Word bubble 1:
"Well, ok James, everything is fine, don't worry about the missed deadlines. I just wanted to check on you. Remember that there is a lot of support out there for people who have lost loved ones. "

B. Word bubble 2:
"You're welcome. I just want to emphasize that it's really not acceptable to miss any deadlines going forward, so unless there is something that's bothering you that you want to talk about, I expect that you'll improve your performance now."

C. Word bubble 3:
   "No problem. Missed deadlines could impact the team so it's important to address this, but I want you to know that if you're struggling with something, there are things we can do to support your workload. I'm here to help, so please ask for whatever you need."

Answer: **C**

Feedback:

Empathic leadership doesn't mean you have to ignore an employee's decreased performance because you know they're going through something personal. It's also not empathic to solely focus on work performance without acknowledging someone's potential struggles. As an empathic leader, you can address how your employee's decreased performance is impacting the team, while also letting them know that you are there to actively support them, and that they can talk to you or ask for help.

Module 3 Scenario (empathic leadership in action)

You are the leader of the IT team at your organization. Eva, a typically high-performing employee comes to you one day to talk about a mistake she made.

Eva: (word bubble): "Hi, I wanted to talk to you about a mistake I made with a client request. They wanted us to….. and I tried to……. but it ended up producing an error that interfered with their…… and they weren't happy about it."

As an empathic leader, how would you respond to Eva? (you can select each answer to see the series of events that might transpire as a result of your choice).

A. I'm not happy to hear this—this could really impact our relationship with them. You're usually so adept at all the tasks that come your way, so I don't understand what happened. You need to fix this right away and make sure you repair the relationship. This can't happen again. **(non-empathic choice)**

B. Ok, I understand. This is definitely concerning and important to address. I trust you to take the steps you feel are right to fix the error and repair the relationship, but let me know if you need help. Let's also schedule a meeting to talk about how we can avoid these kinds of errors in the future. **(empathic choice)**

Storyboards:

Non-empathic leadership choice sequence:

1. Eva starts experiencing higher levels of anxiety every day at work and doesn't know why
2. Her performance levels start to drop and she makes more mistakes.
3. When she makes mistakes, she feels and acts defensively instead of taking accountability, which leads to interpersonal conflict with others on the team.
4. She stops taking risks in order to come up with creative solutions, and her performance levels continue to decrease.
5. She starts feeling isolated from the team and doesn't ask anymore when she needs help.
6. She becomes more and more discouraged and starts to mentally check out.
7. She leaves her job at the company.

Empathic leadership choice sequence:

1. Eva starts feeling even better about her role at the company, and feels she is valued, so she starts taking some healthy risks that end up increasing company revenue.
2. She starts to feel more secure in taking accountability when she makes mistakes, which improves some of her previously challenging relationships with certain team members, so the team is now even more cohesive and productive.
3. When she feels stuck on something, she goes directly to her team leader since she knows she will be supported, and a few times, this saves projects from going awry or missing deadlines.
4. Others on the team notice her actions—her communication, accountability, and how she goes directly to the team leader for help—and start doing the same. The team gets even stronger and the company's bottom line continues to increase.
5. The company reaches its lowest turnover rate to date.

What a difference an empathic response makes! You might not think that your choice of words or tone matters that much, but it does. Because of the way our brains work, one interaction can lead to a spiral of events that is either positive or negative. When you practice empathic leadership, you subtly influence the trajectory of your team and company on a daily basis!