

# Fact-File 27: Resonant Leadership... cultivating connectivity counts



Extracts from our course Guide for **The Compassionate Leader**

## Connective Leaders – a new breed?

Most leaders are still conditioned to lead with their heads, not their hearts – to put business before benevolence. The public profile of a good leader espoused in the press still routinely cites attributes like tough, decisive, hard-nosed, quick-to-judge, ultra-rational and results-driven.

Yet this is changing. More leaders now connect successful outcomes with their level of *emotional intelligence* – their ability to ‘tune into themselves’ and be more mindful of the impact their thinking, feelings, moods and behaviour have on the people they lead. They’re interested in a more connective style – *in leading through feelings*.

This may be human kindness but it also makes practical business sense too. It’s realising if you want people to take committed action and put in superior performance, you have to connect with emotions first. People can’t focus and do good work if they’re distracted by strong negative emotions. It’s at the ‘feelings’ level where many performance and productivity problems lie.

To do something about it, you need to connect with feelings. This takes ‘*emotional intelligence*’ (EI). EI covers competency areas connected to:

- Emotional Awareness:** being fully mindful of what I feel and using that to guide how I choose to behave or respond.
- Self-Management:** how well I can control my emotions to keep in balance – especially disruptive, damaging or negative ones.
- Social Intelligence:** knowing how my feelings impact others and using emotions to build more positive, productive relationships.
- Connectivity:** which includes the most powerful of emotionally intelligent practices – empathy – the ability to read how others feel, understand their emotional makeup and deal with their responses in a resonant way.

## Spotting a Connective Leader

Connective leaders are emotionally intelligent.

They always make themselves approachable and read and respond to other people’s feelings very well. They use empathy and acknowledgement to maintain relationships and even to handle difficult discussions. They’re able to resonate with the moods or emotions of their teams, then act in

ways that are emotionally effective – that bring out the best in others. Even faced with difficult situations, when hard messages have to be delivered, they stay connected with other’s feelings and keep one eye on the relationship.

Here’s some ways to spot a connective leader. *Have you seen many around your workplace?*

- ◆ *Connective leaders are ‘in-tune’ feeling-wise.* What they say and do resonates – and they always have the time to engage in connective conversations with others.
- ◆ *Connective leaders manage their moods.* They know feelings are catchy and they use positive emotions to inspire, not infect others with negative, de-motivating feelings.
- ◆ *Connective leaders put people before procedures.* They’re willing to set aside or change outmoded or emotionally dissonant rules and regulations for the greater good.
- ◆ *Connective leaders show sincere, heartfelt consideration.* They genuinely care for the well-being of others and have a humane side that puts others needs before theirs.
- ◆ *Connective leaders are mindful.* They’re awake to their own feelings, aware of the impact they have on others and attentive and sympathetic to the needs of others.
- ◆ *Connective leaders are hopeful.* They move others passionately and purposefully with a shared vision that plays on the positive, energising and renewing power of hope.
- ◆ *Connective leaders have the courage to say what they feel.* They convey feelings, fears, even doubts authentically, which builds trust and makes them approachable.
- ◆ *Connective leaders engage others in frank, open dialogue.* They speak candidly with truth, humility, respect and conviction – and make it safe for others to do so too.
- ◆ *Connective leaders read what other people are thinking and feeling.* This empathetic connection keeps them in touch and in tune.
- ◆ *Connective leaders move people – powerfully, passionately, purposefully.* They quietly inspire.

## Empathy – Connectivity in action

It’s empathy that makes connective leadership possible. It’s not just a sentimental fiction. It’s a real brain function...

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- ❑ Spindle cells and mirror neurons, for instance, are designed to detect subtle emotional signals others emit. They're part of what's called the limbic system. It acts as an emotional radar – constantly scanning the human terrain, picking up emotional 'blips' that help us tune in to others and get on the same wavelength.
- ❑ Neuroscientists call this 'limbic resonance'. It explains how we feel sad or glad when someone else does. Taking in facial expressions, body language, chemical emissions or tone of voice, we get an immediate and automatic sense of what other people are feeling.

In more everyday terms, empathy is reading emotions without others having to tell you what they feel. Sensing what others feel without their saying so is the essence of empathy. It's about picking up on where someone else is coming from feelings-wise (even if I don't agree with it).

- ❑ When we're empathetic, we're receptive to other people's feelings as well as to our own.
- ❑ The more attentive we can make ourselves in the moment, the more attuned our limbic radar becomes.
- ❑ Flipping the coin, emotional states like self-absorption, anger, contempt and harsh disapproval dull our radar and dissipate empathy. When we're hyper-critical or too judgemental of someone else, we close ourselves off to what they're feeling.

Why exercise to fine-tune our limbic radars? For a start, understanding what people feel – getting insights into what makes them tick – is essential for working out how to best deal with them. Empathy serves us well in several other ways:

- ❖ With empathy, we can say and do what's appropriate to match the feelings and moods of others around us.
- ❖ It enables us to handle feelings with skill, sensitivity, harmony and humour. Those lacking empathy (or rather, choosing not to tune in to their radar) often act in ways that antagonise, upset and grate with people.
- ❖ If we can read how people feel accurately, we can predict how they might react. This enables us to modify our message or behaviour so we can 'get through' to them.

- ❖ It's also important if you want to get your own way too. To influence someone, I have to create a connection with them first so they'll open up to what I have to say.
- ❖ Reading where people are coming from feeling-wise is also at the bottom of good team relationships, getting along well with others, building friendships and supporting.

Many managers are wary of empathy. They associate it with a too softly-softly approach or being overwhelmed by someone else's strong feelings – giving in to tears, catching a disabling mood, being flooded by another's panic. We tend not to notice other critical times when we catch an emotion that inspires us, makes us feel determined, gives us a sense of hope, leads us to pull together or gets us out of the doldrums. But that's empathy at work as well!

## Connecting through Conversations

Conversations are the main medium through which leaders exercise connectivity. They're at the core of what leaders do – and at the heart of all conversations are feelings. EI has a lot to do with the way we talk to each other, how we come across to others and how much respect, positive regard and collaboration there is in a workplace.

Through connective conversations, leaders:

- ❖ set the tone of workplaces and create cultures that support 'good work'.
- ❖ build a sense of harmony, unity and belongingness
- ❖ create a common purpose, vision and agreed ways of doing things
- ❖ relate to others respectfully, get in tune and shape supportive emotional climates
- ❖ demonstrate great leadership, build team spirit, trust and positive 'can-do' workplaces
- ❖ build better team and work relationships, engage others, help people think together, make connections and create rapport.

When you think begin to think of it this way, connective conversations can be seen as an indispensable leadership tool!

Unfortunately, connective conversations don't happen in many workplaces. We don't connect deeply with each other. Things are kept 'polite'...

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Genuine feelings remain unexpressed. Hard issues are avoided, and true needs and feelings are rarely revealed. When conversations are emotionally off-colour, coordination breaks down, mistakes multiply, productivity plummets and your team is likely to be suffering too! They leave people emotionally exhausted, despondent, distrustful or just plain frustrated.

The most common causes of difficulty can be traced to low levels of listening, acknowledging and sharing of feelings and thoughts – in other words, to a lack of empathy. The trouble is that much of the time, we tend to use conversations to be critical, judgemental and positional rather than supportive, connective and appreciative.

## Leadership – Resonant or Dissonant?

A growing body of brain research proves leaders act as emotional amplifiers for the people around them. Why? Because emotions are catchy. In *The New Leaders*, Daniel Goleman cites Yale University findings that *'emotions spread like viruses' amongst workgroups – and 'leaders who spread bad moods are simply bad for business'*

A leader's moods deeply influence the way other people feel about work, the workplace climate and ultimately performance and productivity. Buoyant moods boost performance. But when people feel down, concentration lapses, mistakes increase and work is likely to be less productive than when they feel good and work at their best.

Leaders guide feelings and have emotional impacts in many ways. For example:

- Providing positive appreciation or negative criticism
- Modelling positive principles and a can-do attitude or reinforcing negative attitudes
- Inspiring people to follow a shared vision or leaving them directionless
- Giving people a sense of meaning and confidence in their work or detracting from it
- Encouraging innovation and unleashing creativity or stemming it
- Being moody, withdrawn, insensitive or emotionally open and connective

When leaders manage emotions positively, they inspire extra effort and focus. They *resonate*.

**Resonant leadership** is when:

- You tune in to the feelings of staff – read their emotions, empathise with them and sometimes voice them on their behalf.
- Our emotional state is picked up by others and creates the same feelings in them – they *resonate* with us. This too, is a biological process called 'entrainment'.
- People feel acknowledged, understood, cared for – which can help them regain energy and focus, get them out of the doldrums and make work more meaningful.

The reverse applies too. Leaders who emanate negative emotions cause dissatisfaction; demoralise and sap the spirit of their staff. Managers who come to work constantly cranky or get exasperated at the drop of a hat can create a toxic climate if this continues over time.

**Dissonant leadership** is when we're 'out of touch' with the feelings of our people. Leaders lacking empathy act in ways that set off negative emotional chain-reactions in others – especially powerful ones like anger, frustration or panic.

Dissonant leaders create toxic climates. Their conversations are laced with cynical contempt, sarcasm, put-downs, personal attacks and other kinds of aggressive behaviour that create distress.

They come in many guises – from dictators, bullies, coercers and polite manipulators to those who are oblivious or just don't care about how people feel – but they all have one thing in common: they lack empathy. Leaders lacking in empathy can be abrasive, arrogant, intimidating or coercive towards staff and often act in ways that further antagonise or upset people and create more dissonance.

## Disconnecting – leaders turning toxic

*Ever wondered why your previously inspiring, positive and supportive boss has turned sour and scratchy lately?*

In *Resonant Leadership*, Boyatzis and McKee, start with the proposition that leadership is stressful. Exercising power puts on pressure that causes once buoyant and resonant leaders to slip slowly into dissonance. They become burnt out, dispirited, scratchy, abrasive and abrupt under pressure.

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Why? The simple answer is that handling those constant crises and heavy-duty responsibilities, and constantly looking out for others is draining. Reserves of resonance, empathy, connectivity dry up and leaders don't pay attention to the 'wake-up' calls that prefigure burn-out.

*"And, because our emotions are contagious, dissonance spreads quickly to those around us and eventually permeates our organisations," say Boyatzis and McKee. "Dissonant leaders wreak havoc – they're at the mercy of volatile emotions and reactivity – they drive people too hard and leave frustration, fear and antagonism in their wake."*

To make things worse, leaders like this are often completely unaware of the damage they do. Many leaders don't look after themselves. When they don't, once-resonant and connected leaders move into dissonance.

The way back is renewal. Returning to resonance through a conscious process of mental and physical practices to inspire, re-energise and counter the effects of leader stress. And the keys to renewal are cultivating *empathy, compassion, mindfulness and hope*.

## Practising Connectivity

There are several practices that can make leaders more connective. Most important is listening without criticism, with judgement filters switched off and with the urge to leap in to say what we want to say firmly curtailed. Here are some others:

- ◆ **Presentness:** Just *'being present'* for people in conversations. Making time to spend with staff and enough genuine interest to add that extra question or comment to show you care. (Eg. *"Tell me more. I've got the time"*, *"I really want to hear"*, *"Is there a way I can help?"* or *"I was concerned you might feel like that..."*)
- ◆ **See Value:** Appreciating someone else's efforts; saying what you value in them or their contribution; recognising potential instead of limitations.
- ◆ **Connect:** Taking that extra few seconds to empathise, to acknowledge something the other person is thinks or feels (eg. *"Seems like you feel/think that..."*)
- ◆ **Contribution:** Instead of stand-back-and-blame, a little bit of admission and humility

will boost your compassion – seeing how I may have contributed to whatever's going on.

- ◆ **Gratitude:** expressing gratitude in a way that inspires cooperation, honesty and trust and motivates people to do better (eg. *"I really liked how you did that"* or *"I really appreciated it when you..."*)
- ◆ **Consideration:** Forgive harsh or unthinking words – they're hijacked by strong emotions. Connect with their concern. Ask yourself: *"If someone I respected did that, how would I act?"*
- ◆ **Joint solution-search:** Don't impose your solutions – that's control. Help others talk through their predicaments and search with them to find solutions.
- ◆ **Sincerity:** *Be genuine in what you say too.* Don't ignore your feelings and thoughts – be courageous enough to share them. But do so in a way that doesn't blame or offend the other person. When others feel we're speaking our truth, from the heart, this can increase trust and openness between you
- ◆ **Curiosity not Control:** being critical and judgemental does not motivate people and creates unsafe emotional climates. They adopt a stance of curiosity – wondering what's going on for others and how they can help – rather than blaming, criticising, judging or offering harsh comments. They know that coaching people towards goals is a better method than command and control and they treat each team member with respect.

Is there a place for a new breed of connective leader? While we'll no doubt never rid ourselves of the hard-hearted, bottom line exec, we may find those who exhibit the characteristics of a connective one may just fare better in handling crises, inspiring people to committed action and communicating more effectively in the more challenging economic, ecological and social climate this new millennium brings.

The Change Forum conducts practical 2-day coaching clinics for leaders who want to learn how to handle emotions better in the workplace. For a brochure or more information on **Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence or The Compassionate Leader...** ☎: 07-4068 7591

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