HUMANIZING LEADERSHIP: FROM EMPATHY TO INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

The more our environment becomes digital and artificial, the greater the need to humanize leadership. This paper aims to advance understanding and give suggestions on how certain leadership capabilities can be developed that could be considered key in humanizing leadership in the digital age: empathy, listening, and inclusion. Empathy is essential for deep listening, while both empathy and listening lead to genuine inclusion. Developing these three capabilities would allow leaders to better recognize, respect, and value the emotions, perspectives, and ideas of others, which has become key to improving well-being and effectiveness on the individual, group, and organizational levels. The proposed humanizing leadership framework is applicable to organizational leadership at all levels and across the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Leadership development specialists can utilize it to design and implement programs tailored to individual and organizational objectives, while current and aspiring leaders can use it for learning and development.

Keywords: *leadership, leadership development, empathy, listening, inclusion*
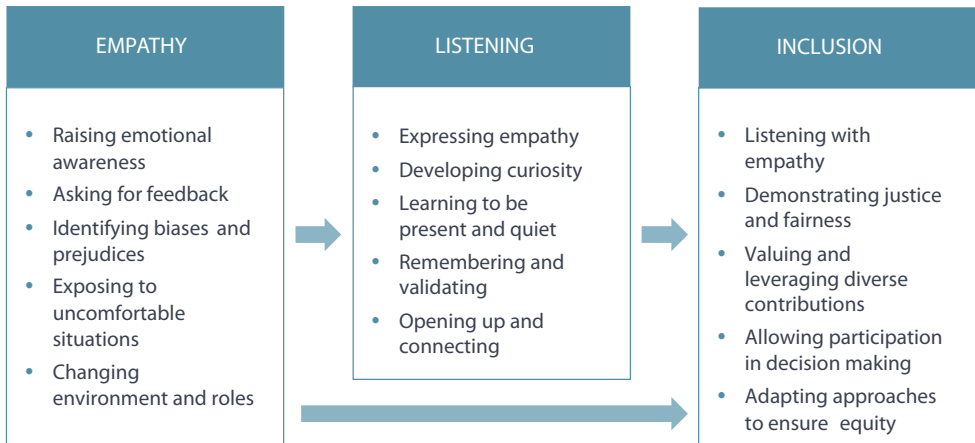
1. INTRODUCTION

While the focus on artificial intelligence grows, leaders increasingly need human intelligence to lead people. Employees now expect their leaders to show genuine care for their well-being, which most leaders are still uncomfortable with. Developing the capabilities of leaders that would allow them to better recognize, respect and value the emotions, perspectives, and ideas of others has become key to enhancing the well-being and effectiveness on the individual, group, and organizational levels. Supporting today's leaders requires leadership development frameworks that are purposeful, focused, and adaptable to cultural and organizational contexts.

Leadership development refers to developing reciprocal commitments and relationships necessary for effective leading-following processes within a given social context (DeRue & Myers, 2014). It is aimed at raising awareness of individual and collective purpose and values, identifying development needs, priorities and intended outcomes, acquiring leadership knowledge and skills through facilitated experiences, integrating all these elements into leadership practice, and continuously reflecting on the development processes. Leadership development is therefore more complex and comprehensive than leadership education and leadership training. Internal learning and development specialists and external leadership development specialists should develop and propose leadership development strategies that would align the purpose and objectives of the organization and its current and potential leaders.

According to the *2023 Global Leadership Development Study: Ready for Anything* (Harvard Business Publishing, 2024), one of the key challenges for leadership development today is humanizing leadership in the digital age. This study highlights the following skills for humanizing leadership: (i) empathy in communication, feedback sharing, and listening; (ii) high emotional and social intelligence; (iii) ability to manage conflict among team members; and (iv) intent and ability to promote diversity and inclusion in the workforce.

This paper aims to advance understanding and give suggestions on how certain leadership capabilities can be developed that could be considered key in humanizing leadership in the digital age: empathy, listening, and inclusion. The proposed humanizing leadership framework (Figure 1) is applicable to organizational leadership at all levels and across the private, public, and non-profit sectors.

Figure 1: Humanizing leadership framework

EMPATHY	LISTENING	INCLUSION
• Raising emotional awareness • Asking for feedback • Identifying biases and prejudices • Exposing to uncomfortable situations • Changing environment and roles	• Expressing empathy • Developing curiosity • Learning to be present and quiet • Remembering and validating • Opening up and connecting	• Listening with empathy • Demonstrating justice and fairness • Valuing and leveraging diverse contributions • Allowing participation in decision making • Adapting approaches to ensure equity

Source: Author's work

2. EMPATHY

Empathy in leadership is a precondition for deep listening and genuine inclusion. In today's continuously changing, complex, and uncertain environments, a leader's capability to express empathy is particularly valued. Empathy is a key emotional intelligence competency that can be developed throughout life. It is the foundation for effective relationship management, along with emotional self-control (Goleman, 2006, 2007). According to Goleman et al. (2017), three aspects of empathy are recognized in the neuroscience and psychology literature: cognitive empathy (the ability to understand another person's perspective and to reflect on the mental state of others); emotional empathy (the ability to feel what another person feels and be emotionally in tune with feelings of others); and empathic concern or compassion (acting on an inclination to relieve the distress of another person).

Prior research indicates that empathy enhances leadership effectiveness through its impact on the level of leader, followers, and organization (Živković, 2022). On the level of the leader, empathy contributes to raising self-awareness which leads to enhanced verbal and non-verbal expression, developing listening and mentoring skills due to the capability to perceive and care about the needs of others, and improving relationships with stakeholders both within and outside the organization. The outcomes of empathy in leadership on the followers' level include improving employee mental and emotional well-being due to the leader's caring attitude and a more favorable work climate, empowering through recognition and development, and providing role models in developing emotional intelligence. Empathy enhances organizational effective-

ness by fostering diversity and inclusion, increasing employee engagement and retention, and building a culture of care, responsibility, and innovation.

The following strategies for developing empathy are proposed to be an integral part of leadership development programs aimed at humanizing leadership:

- *Raising emotional awareness:* To empathize with the emotions of others, it is necessary for leaders to recognize, understand and accept their own emotions. Observing emotions as they arise in the present moment, reflecting on how we felt in the past in certain situations and with certain people, and naming emotions are practices that could improve emotional awareness.

- *Asking for feedback:* How we see ourselves, our behaviors and our reactions is often not how others see us. It is therefore important that leaders ask for feedback regarding their (non)expression of empathy from both their teams and peers to identify development needs.

- *Identifying biases and prejudices:* Feeling and expressing empathy can be selective in the way that it exists only toward people with similar backgrounds. Therefore, it is necessary to identify according to which groups of people with different national, racial, religious, professional, and other backgrounds a leader has prejudices. To abandon or reduce such prejudices, it takes conscious effort and more interaction with diverse groups.

- *Exposing to uncomfortable situations:* It is in human nature to avoid uncomfortable emotions. However, engaging in uncomfortable conversations and tasks, reading uncomfortable books, or watching uncomfortable movies that are meaningful, bring new perspectives and offer insight into various human experiences across cultures can contribute to the development of empathy.

- *Changing environment and roles:* Visits to other places and cultures allow a better understanding of diversity. Openness to engaging in roles other than managerial, such as volunteering, mentoring, and assistance to people in need, expands the leader's capacity to empathize with others.

3. LISTENING

Listening is essential in leadership that fosters learning, supportiveness, and inclusion. However, leadership development guidelines and programs are mostly emphasizing how leaders should speak and not so how they should listen. As a multidimensional skill, listening involves hearing, perceiving, understanding, assigning meaning, remembering, evaluating, and responding (Flynn et al., 2008). Two types of listening that are considered most relevant to leadership practice are active and deep listening. Active listening implies

that the listener remains sensitive to the message's meaning, asks questions to understand the context, responds to emotional reactions during the conversation, and notices both verbal and non-verbal cues (Rogers & Farson, 1987). In active listening, the full attention of the listener is on the speaker. Deep listening focuses on opening up to new possibilities, new perspectives, and new ways of thinking and acting, connecting with others, and deepening understanding of one's self and others (Laryea, 2018). In deep listening, the attention of the listener is both on oneself and the speaker. Such an approach to listening can result in generative conversations and change on multiple levels.

In their review of research on listening in the workplace, Flynn et al. (2008) indicate that managerial listening can improve communication, collaboration, employee morale and retention, learning and productivity in organizations, and result in stronger perceptions of trust, supportiveness, and motivation. Listening becomes more critical to effectiveness as individuals move into senior management positions (Brownell, 1994). Therefore, the development of listening skills is important at both lower and middle management levels, as it contributes to the preparation of individuals for leadership positions and improves effectiveness within the organization.

The proposed strategies for developing listening skills aimed at humanizing leadership include:

- *Expressing empathy:* To express empathic concern by listening, it is key to recognize, reflect on and acknowledge the mental and emotional state of others. It is challenging yet beneficial to recall and be aware of how much it would mean to us if someone listened to us.

- *Developing curiosity:* Listening to learn driven by curiosity can diminish the urge to express an opinion and give advice after we listened to others. Curiosity can be developed and expressed by asking thoughtful questions, noticing and interpreting non-verbal cues, and nurturing a sense of awe.

- *Learning to be present and quiet:* Listening with the intention to truly understand and support others requires being present in the moment, a capacity built on self-awareness and self-control. It is crucial not to interrupt others during the conversation. Instead of commenting or asking questions immediately after the person says something, it is often more supportive to remain quiet and make pause despite the awkward silence since this can create a space for a person to open up more and say what is of substantial importance to them.

- *Remembering and validating:* Repeating or paraphrasing to others what they said during the current conversation, as well as in previous ones, is a way to show that we listened carefully and to make the other feel

respected and valued. The validation of what we have heard and seen through non-verbal cues does not imply agreeing with the other but rather acknowledging the situation and emotions of the other.

- *Opening up and connecting:* Being open to being touched by what we hear implies vulnerability and the courage that goes with it. It enhances the leader's capability to connect with others and, consequently, improve relationships, collaboration and effectiveness.

4. INCLUSION

Inclusion in leadership is needed to leverage diversity within work environments for the purposes of both individual and organizational development. Inclusion implies the degree to which a person perceives that she or he is valued as a member of the group through experiencing treatment that contributes to satisfying her or his needs for belonging (the need to develop and maintain strong and fulfilling interpersonal relationships) and uniqueness (the need to preserve a distinct sense of self) (Randel and et al., 2018).

Inclusive leadership recognizes differences among people as a source of strength and advancement (Hays-Thomas, 2022). It implies building an organizational culture where all individuals feel accepted, valued and rewarded (Garg & Sangwan, 2021). Although the constructs of transformational and empowering leadership may involve fostering inclusion to accomplish shared objectives, inclusive leadership additionally facilitates belongingness, ensures justice and equity, promotes diverse contributions, and highlights the value of the uniqueness of individuals (Randel et al., 2018).

A review of prior research conducted by Korkmaz et al. (2022) showed that inclusive leadership is related to positive outcomes on the level of employee (e.g., well-being, creativity, engagement, voice behavior, innovative behavior, organizational citizenship behavior, knowledge sharing behavior, job performance, task performance, self-efficacy, etc.), team (e.g., team diversity, identity, innovation and performance, unit psychological safety and performance, workgroup performance and effectiveness, global virtual team experiences, etc.), and organization (e.g., inclusive culture and climate, business model innovation, project success, etc.). According to Randel et al. (2018), a key positive impact of inclusion is related to the psychological empowerment and work identification of individuals, which, in turn, leads to positive outcomes on the group or organizational level.

The following strategies for developing capabilities to foster inclusion of employees are proposed to be implemented into leadership development programs aimed at humanizing leadership:

- *Listening with empathy:* Both expressing empathy and listening contribute to enhanced well-being of employees which could lead to psychological empowerment as they feel heard, seen, and appreciated. By listening to employees and recognizing their mental and emotional state, a leader can more effectively identify their potential and needs.

- *Demonstrating justice and fairness:* A fair treatment of all group members shows them that they are respected as members of the group. Leaders should take care that the work environment is free of harassment, intimidation, and unlawful discrimination. They should set the standards and then lead by example in fostering justice and fairness in the workplace.

- *Valuing and leveraging diverse contributions:* Leaders should learn to see differences as opportunities for growth and development. Building a culture where employees are invited to share their ideas and opinions, identify problems, and propose solutions leads to diverse contributions of individuals. This, in turn, creates a sense in employees that their uniqueness is valued.

- *Allowing participation in decision making:* Within certain boundaries and depending on the workplace characteristics, leaders should allow employees to participate in decision making on both the individual and team levels. This implies that leaders should be capable of delegating and supporting autonomy of their team members. Shared decision making contributes to creating a sense of belongingness.

- *Adapting approaches to ensure equity:* Based on identified diverse abilities, needs and circumstances, leaders should adapt their approaches to each person to the extent possible. They should proactively consider how certain decisions might undermine equity among group members and provide the resources they need to have an equal opportunity to be effective.

5. CONCLUSION

The proposed humanizing leadership framework focused on empathy, listening, and inclusion is relevant and applicable across cultural and organizational contexts. Empathy is essential for deep listening, while both empathy and listening lead to genuine inclusion. Leadership development programs that integrate developing these three capabilities could enhance leader and organizational effectiveness through improved employee well-being, engagement, and performance. Humanizing leadership and, consequently, building a culture of care within organizations, can also contribute to the co-creation of a positive impact on a societal level. The proposed humanizing leadership framework can be utilized by leadership development specialists in designing and implementing programs tailored to individual and organizational objectives, while current and aspiring leaders can use it for learning and development.

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HUMANIZIRANJE VODSTVA: OD EMPATIJE DO UKLJUČIVANJA

SAŽETAK RADA

Što više naše okruženje postaje digitalno i umjetno, to je veća potreba za humaniziranjem vodstva. Cilj ovog rada je unaprijediti razumijevanje i dati prijedloge o tome kako se mogu razviti određene sposobnosti vodstva koje bi se mogle smatrati ključnima u humaniziranju vodstva u digitalnom dobu: empatija, slušanje i uključivanje. Empatija je neophodna za duboko slušanje, dok i empatija i slušanje vode do istinske uključenosti. Razvijanje ove tri sposobnosti omogućilo bi vođama da bolje prepoznaju, poštuju i vrednuju emocije, perspektive i ideje drugih, što je postalo ključno za poboljšanje dobrobiti i uspješnosti na individualnoj, grupnoj i organizacijskoj razini. Predloženi okvir humaniziranja vodstva primjenjiv je na organizacijsko vodstvo na svim razinama te u privatnom, javnom i neprofitnom sektoru. Stručnjaci za razvoj vodstva mogu ga koristiti za osmišljavanje i provedbu programa prilagođenih pojedinačnim i organizacijskim ciljevima, dok ga sadašnji i potencijalni vođe mogu koristiti za učenje i razvoj.

Ključne riječi: *vodstvo, razvoj vodstva, empatija, slušanje, uključivanje*