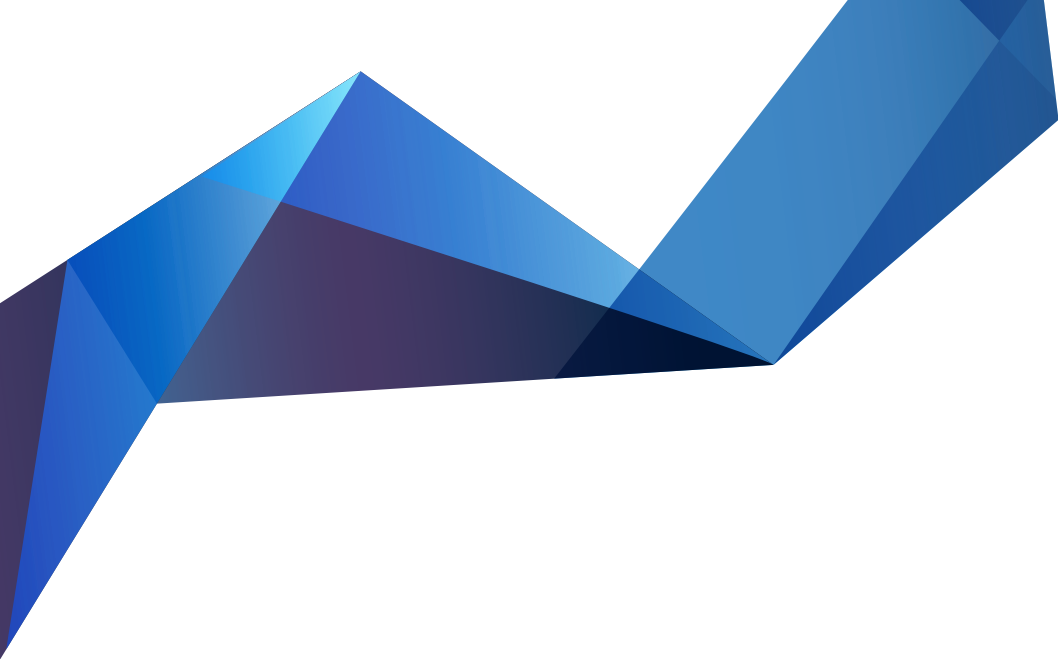




A Communicator's Guide to Building Empathy into Your Culture

Nationwide, Allstate and more share the ways empathy has positively impacted their engagement with employees for better business results.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



ragan
Communications
— LEADERSHIP COUNCIL —

Mark Ragan
Chairman & Founder
Mark.Ragan@ragan.com

Diane Schwartz
CEO
DianeS@ragan.com

Mandy Zaransky-Hurst
COO/Head of Leadership Councils
MandyZ@ragan.com

Brian Gilbert
CFO
BrianG@ragan.com

Amy Jefferies
CMO
AmyJ@ragan.com

Joyceann Garippa
Director of Content
JoyceannG@ragan.com

Hannah Lavelle
Director of Business Development
HannahL@ragan.com

Roula Amire
VP, Editorial
RoulaA@ragan.com

Justin Levine
Manager, Leadership Councils
JustinL@ragan.com

Shallon Blackburn
Head of Customer Service & Sales
ShallonB@ragan.com

Maggie Smith
Sales Assistant
MaggieS@ragan.com

Jennifer Mazurek
VP, Production
JenniferM@ragan.com

Tony Silber
Editorial Director
TonyS@ragan.com

Robby Brumberg
Editor, Ragan.com
RobbyB@ragan.com

Ted Kitterman
Editor, PR Daily
TedK@ragan.com

Sean McClure
Digital Director
SeanM@ragan.com

Vlad Prvulovic
Senior Web Developer/Programmer
VladP@ragan.com



INTRODUCTION

If 2020 taught us anything, it's that empathy is vital to internal communications but is often misunderstood.

As we aim for more empathy in our messaging, how can we do better? Understanding what empathy is and isn't is the first step. "Empathy is doing a much better job in understanding what your employees are dealing with," says Matthew Young, director of internal communications and community relations at ABB.

"Empathy has changed the game because it is a direct emotional connection to the employee instead of just logic. You could say we have moved from employee engagement to employee experience to employee empathy."

How employers and employees view empathy differs. While CEOs think of empathy in terms of the end result of increased productivity, employees believe empathy makes work a better place to invest their time. CEOs believe they're empathetic. Their employees don't feel the same way.

The breakdown in empathetic communication happens in the in-between.

"Empathic leadership should be continually informed by data and personal stories," says Ann Barlow, senior partner at Peppercomm. "We often think we understand what employees or others are experiencing, but without real knowledge, it's easy to draw the wrong conclusion and take



Only
48%
of employees
believe
companies as
a whole are
empathetic,
versus 68% of
CEOs.

Source: 2020 State of Workplace Empathy. Images are reproduced with permission from Businessolver, copyright 2020. All rights reserved.



the wrong action.”

Communicators hoping to avoid these missteps will get the answers here. Our Executive Summary of an exclusive report from [Ragan’s Communications Leadership Council](#) will show how cultivating empathy in culture, leadership, and internal communications is the solution for clearer messaging to employees.

This report is a product of [Ragan’s Communications Leadership Council](#). You can learn more about the Council and [its benefits](#), which include research and benchmarking reports, or contact our Customer Service department at cservice@ragan.com or 800-878-5331.

The challenge: Steps to building an empathy-first culture

Nationwide insurance company has been working empathy into its culture for some time, learning to listen and respond to its 30,000 employees.

During the pandemic, its executive leadership team transitioned its town halls to virtual. Depending on demand, they meet monthly or more often.

The forums focus on authenticity and transparency to show empathy and gain trust among employees. Using a combination of Microsoft Teams, Microsoft Streaming, and Slido, employees can ask questions directly.

They can vote on the questions they want asked, and the most popular ones are addressed first. If time runs out before they're all answered, the leadership team either answers them via email or schedules another town hall. Anywhere from half to 70% of the workforce attends the live session, with more watching the recorded version later.

Nationwide uses several other tools to ensure they're listening to employees and responding with empathy. The HR team works with Gallup to conduct annual culture surveys, and pulse surveys are routine. They gather measurable data with empathy metrics.

"It helps us be the voice of the employee when we're in a room with the senior and executive teams," says Brian Grace, Nationwide's chief communications officer. Coming prepared with data to advocate for employee mindset and gauge employee reactions to leadership decisions helps build empathetic culture from the top down.

Create space
Ask the questions
Listen
LREALLY listen

Nationwide's Brian Grace uses this simple method to practice empathy and encourage it in his teammates.

The challenge: How to work with key leadership to encourage empathy

When employees are looking for empathy from leadership, the most significant impact isn't from the CEO: it's their direct supervisor. No matter how empathetic their HR manager or co-workers are, if their manager doesn't communicate empathy in daily communications, it reflects on the employee's experience with the organization as a whole. The impact on engagement, retention and hiring is well-known.

Susan DeMory, corporate relations manager for Allstate, agrees communicators play an important role in building trust between leaders and their employees. She recommends leaders focus on these four primary areas of employer/employee relations to encourage empathetic communications.

1. Create an environment that cultivates compassion.
2. Understand what motivates employees.
3. Create social norms.
4. Encourage leaders to be transparent.

Expanding on her last point, DeMory says communicators need to help leaders develop an employee-centric mindset to improve human interactions, which will ultimately lead to more effective and positive outcomes.

Allstate went through a restructuring in 2020, and leadership communications focused on transparency and employee well-being to navigate the storm. Monthly town halls with the CEO and other leaders allowed employees to ask questions and receive answers in a caring and authentic way, says DeMory. The company also extended benefits to assist employees with pandemic burdens.

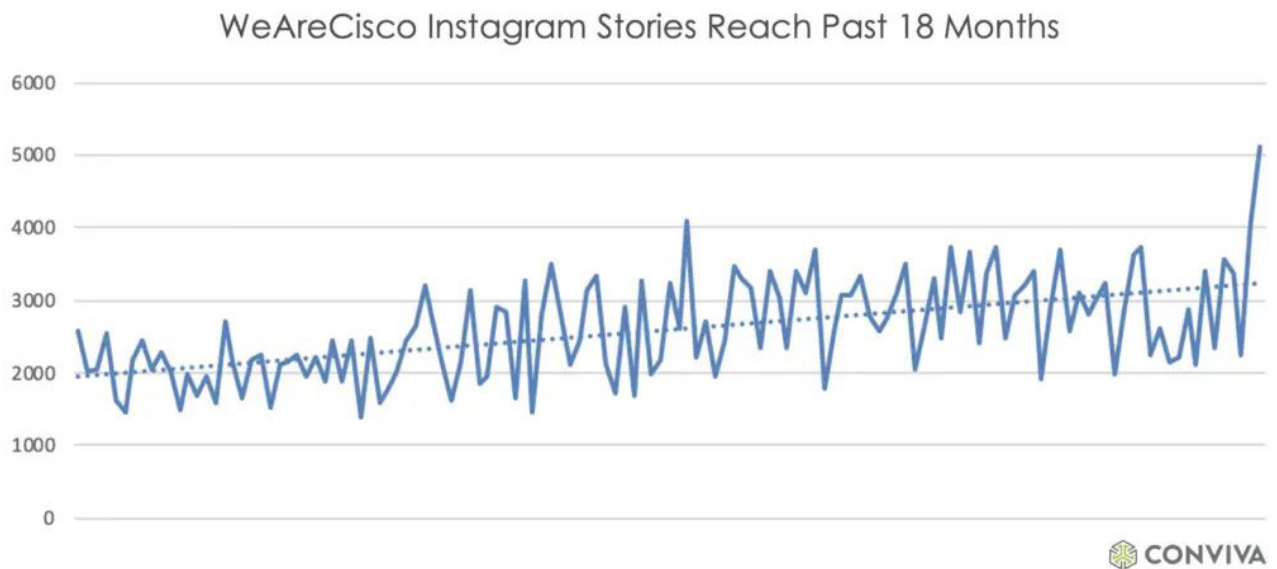
"Showing that united leadership front and that consistent empathy played a key role in employee retention once it was complete," says DeMory.

The challenge: How to help managers infuse empathy into their day-to-day communications

With leaders focused on empathy and communicators ready to circulate the message, what does that communication look like? From direct, in-person demonstrations of empathy to a social media channel filled with employee content, these companies see an impact when they make room for empathy in their channels.

Tech giant Cisco has encouraged employees to be themselves and use their voice for several years with the hashtag #WeAreCisco. Last year their Instagram stories' went from 2,000 people per post to 5,000 per post. Their employee-written blog has sometimes been the game-changer for candidates inundated with opportunities. When Cisco competes for top talent, the high industry demand for specific skill sets means it needs an edge. Carmen Collins, employee/r brand and social media lead at Cisco, tells the story of one such hiring success.

A hiring manager reached out on LinkedIn to a candidate who was likely receiving 10 InMails a day from recruiters. During an internet search of her, the candidate found a blog post the hiring manager had written on Cisco's site and was so impressed with her, he responded to her message.



Cisco's Instagram reach saw tremendous gain with empathetic employee posts. Image courtesy of [Conviva](#).

“He’s now working at Cisco because of her story,” says Collins. “The reason he answered her InMail and let her into his very boxed-off world was because of her story. He said, ‘I want to work for her, for a team like that.’”

Being open about the human side of tech and showing empathy with others made this candidate choose to work for Cisco over the competition.

Corgibytes creates a shame-free culture

Some people just like fixing things, and for Corgibytes, that means turning old broken code into better, upgraded code. In tech’s “maker” culture, repair work seems counterculture. But Corgibytes co-founder Scott Ford loved fixing code, and he knew he wasn’t alone.




After listening empathetically to the desires of people like Ford, fellow Corgibytes co-founder Andrea Goulet created a “mender” culture and promoted the idea to candidates. Its message directly addressed their feelings of being ignored and shamed for their preferences.

“Empathy is the antidote to shame,” says Goulet.

The response was impressive. By thinking like its desired candidate, understanding their point of view and experience, and communicating to this target audience in language they understood, Corgibytes ended up finding incredible talent. Not only that, it has a high retention rate and a backlog of talent waiting to work for them. Goulet says morale is high, they boast better customer service and develop product faster and more accurately.

“It’s about the thinking style,” says Goulet. “It’s about creating an environment for belonging.”

EMPATHY CLARIFIED

| | | |
|--|---|---|
|  |  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• CHARACTER-BASED• SYMPATHY OR PITY• TELEPATHY• SIMPLE• PASSIVE• ACCEPTANCE | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• FEELING• WALKING IN SOMEONE'S SHOES• SOMETHING YOU'RE BORN WITH• INTUITION | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• SKILL YOU GROW W/ PRACTICE• DATA-DRIVEN• BOTH RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL• COMPLEX• ACTIVE |

Source: Andrea Goulet, Corgibytes

Corgibytes' Andrea Goulet uses this image to explain empathy during training. Image courtesy of Corgibytes and Andrea Goulet.

CONCLUSION

Bringing an empathetic mindset to culture, leadership and communications is how many companies are surviving the pandemic's slow-moving crisis. The need for empathy isn't over, so learning what empathy is and threading it into corporate responses should be a top priority.

Making space to listen to the stories behind the demographics, being authentic and transparent about decision-making, and gathering data to better understand what employees are going through will lead to impactful, more empathetic communications.

"Fortunately, there's a simple enough solution," says Peppercomm's Barlow. "Ask."

 ragan
Communications
— LEADERSHIP COUNCIL —

commscouncil.ragan.com