

Leading with Empathy

Strategies for empathy-driven leadership in public procurement

Introduction

Every day in procurement, you're juggling competing priorities. What if the key to better results isn't only in the data — but in how you connect with others?

Empathy is more than kindness or consideration. Harness the power of this practical leadership tool to build trust, resolve conflicts, and inspire success.

According to a study by Catalyst, empathetic leadership has far-reaching impacts on innovation, inclusivity, and work-life balance¹. Leaders who practice empathy foster engaged teams, drive creativity, and create supportive workplaces.

Definition: **em • pa • thy**
/'empəTHē/
noun
the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.
"He showed empathy by considering how the decision would affect his team."

What is empathy?

Empathy is the ability to recognize and understand the feelings, thoughts, and perspectives of others. Empathy is more than a soft skill. Lean into empathy to create strong partnerships, ethical decisions, and a workplace where people feel valued. Recent research published in Management Review Quarterly supports the benefits of leading with empathy, showing that it fosters trust and collaboration that ultimately leads to organizational success.²

Imagine navigating a supply chain disruption. Use your emerging empathy skills to put yourself in the supplier's shoes by listening to their concerns, working together on solutions to minimize the impact, and establishing a timeline that meets immediate needs and future goals.

Sources:

¹ Van Blommel, Tara. "The Power of Empathy in Times of Crisis and Beyond," catalyst.org (updated 2025).

² Muss, C., Tüxen, D. & Fürstenau, B. "Empathy in leadership: a systematic literature review on the effects of empathetic leaders in organizations." Management Review Quarterly (2025).

Debunking common myths

Myth vs. Truth

Myth: Empathy is weakness in leadership.

Truth: Empathy is a leadership strength that enables you to better understand people's needs and motivations. By balancing organizational goals with employee well-being, you can foster a culture that delivers more meaningful results.

Myth: Empathy is just being nice.

Truth: Empathy goes beyond kindness. During difficult or critical conversations, leaders use empathy to guide, challenge, and find common ground to resolve conflicts.

Myth: Empathy is putting others' needs above your goals.

Truth: Empathy is about balance — understanding others while staying aligned with organizational goals. Active listening during a budget review, for example, can find solutions that benefit both stakeholders and the bottom line.

Myth: Empathy is only relevant to personal relationships.

Truth: Empathy plays a crucial role in cultivating professional connections, too. In procurement, practicing empathy improves partnerships with suppliers and supports collaboration across departments.

Myth: Empathy is incompatible with objectivity.

Truth: Empathy complements objectivity. It helps you make decisions that account for both fact and human impact.

Empathy in public procurement

You're practicing empathy every day — navigating supplier relationships, managing internal dynamics, and coming together with stakeholders to meet shared goals. Leading with understanding can help you achieve better outcomes for your organization and excel in your daily responsibilities.

How empathy empowers success

Empathy isn't just "nice to have." It's a missing link in procurement leadership that drives results.

- ✔ **Building strong partnerships:** Mutual understanding lays the foundation for positive supplier interactions and long-term collaboration. Regular touchpoints, surveys, or open houses, help uncover supplier pain points, identify opportunities for cost savings, and reduce risk of disruptions.

"It's good to have those open houses where they come in and they just tell us, 'Hey, this is what we're seeing in the market,'" said Diane Palmer-Boeck, CPPO, PPMC, founder and principal consultant of Government Procurement and Leadership Solutions. "Suppliers have a pretty good finger on the pulse of what's happening the next 12 to 18, even 24 to 36 months, depending on the industry."

- ✔ **Improving negotiations:** Fairness and transparency pave the way for win-win negotiations. The picture is almost always bigger than it seems. Taking the time to inquire and listen for underlying needs provides valuable leverage that you may harness to create solutions that benefit everyone involved.
- ✔ **Empowering work-life balance:** Empathetic leadership enables employees to manage work and personal demands more effectively — 86% of employees with empathetic leaders report success compared to 60% with less empathetic leadership¹. Research also shows that leading with empathy reduces employee burnout and improves employee mental and physical well-being.²

Care for yourself first: empathy starts with you

- ✔ **Prioritize emotional well-being.** Take time to reflect, recharge, and practice mindfulness. Expanding your emotional bandwidth allows you to connect meaningfully with others, even during demanding RFP cycles.
- ✔ **Model healthy habits.** Set clear boundaries for your workload and encourage your team to do the same.
- ✔ **Set boundaries to prevent fatigue.** Protect your energy by saying "no" when necessary and delegating tasks.
- ✔ **Recharge for long-term impact.** Regularly assess your energy levels and take intentional steps to replenish them — whether through time off or stress-relieving activities.

- ✓ **Adapting to change and challenges:** Policy shifts, budget adjustments, or market disruptions can cause resistance. Transparent communication and open dialogue ease anxieties, align goals, and keep teams focused. Giving your team a voice and a sense of ownership during uncertainty helps create champions
- ✓ **Encouraging diversity and inclusion:** Understanding diverse experiences allows you to break down barriers and build high-performing teams. Employees with empathetic leaders perceive their workplace as inclusive – 50%, compared to only 17% of those with less empathetic leaders.¹ who can drive change in places beyond your direct influence.
- ✓ **Identifying risks and opportunities:** Understanding the pressures others face helps anticipate challenges, uncover opportunities, and reduce risks related to burnout, physical health, and mental well-being.
- ✓ **Enhancing decision-making:** Complex procurement situations often require balancing organizational goals with stakeholder needs. Leaders who practice empathy are better equipped to understand and consider diverse perspectives, which leads to more ethical and effective decision-making.² By considering all viewpoints — whether during supplier evaluations, stakeholder meetings, or policy updates — you can make informed decisions that mitigate risks, reduce inefficiencies, and drive sustainable outcomes.
- ✓ **Developing emotional resilience:** Staying attuned to your emotions and those of others strengthens your ability to navigate stress, uncertainty, and complex situations.
- ✓ **Improving stakeholder management:** Bridge the gaps that data alone can't solve. Actively listening to stakeholders leads to smoother project rollouts, more accurate budget planning, and reduced miscommunication, saving time and resources for your organization.

“If we’re not understanding the frustrations or priorities of others, we’ll miss the bigger picture and hurt the overall success of the procurement process,” shared Palmer-Boeck.

Recharge and refocus: simple actions

- ✓ **Take a 30-second reset.** Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths before responding to an email or starting your next task.
- ✓ **Change your environment.** After wrapping up a demanding project, step away from your desk and grab a coffee, stretch, or go for a quick walk.
- ✓ **Give yourself grace.** Procurement can be demanding. Acknowledge challenges without guilt and recognize that you’re doing your best.



Overcoming barriers to leading with understanding

While empathy is important for procurement leadership success, it's not always easy to practice. Tight deadlines, strict compliance regulations, and high stakes decisions can make it difficult to make connections or maintain perspective. Understand these barriers to overcome them.



External manipulation

Some individuals may exploit empathy for personal gain. Protecting yourself and your organization requires balancing empathy with discernment. As Director of Procurement at South Carolina State University, Stacy Gregg advised, “guard your gate” — set clear boundaries and align your decisions with organizational goals.



Organizational culture

A strict focus on compliance, efficiency, or cost savings over relationships can stifle empathy. Organization policies and norms shape how open, honest, and collaborative teams can be during the procurement process. Shifting to a more people-centered culture requires top-down support and recognizing procurement as a strategic partner, not just a gatekeeper. Studies show that empathy also helps leaders better understand and address employees' needs, fostering a supportive work environment, and boosting overall job satisfaction.²



Time pressures

Procurement demands often push tasks over people. Even a brief pause to check in can prevent hours of conflict or misunderstanding later.



Cognitive biases and assumptions

Unconscious biases and stereotypes can cloud judgment. Meet people where they are by acknowledging their needs and hurdles for better rapport and a more inclusive environment.



Emotional overload

High-stakes situations, like bid protests or negotiations, can trigger stress and defensiveness. To stay calm and focus on solutions over emotions, try practicing the “Three ‘P’s”.

The three ‘P’s for smart responses



Pause

Step back and collect yourself before reacting.



Prepare

Gather the facts and details needed to address the situation thoughtfully.



Present

Respond calmly and clearly, focusing on solutions rather than emotions.

“You can be empathetic while still upholding high standards.”

— Stacy Gregg

Becoming a more empathetic leader

When a team member made a mistake that resulted in the protest, Gregg led with compassion and accountability. Instead of focusing solely on the error, she supported her employee through the process while maintaining high expectations for improvement. “You can be empathetic while still upholding high standards,” she explained. Her actions strengthened their trust and boosted morale, turning a difficult situation into a learning experience.

- **Practice active listening:** Tune into tone, body language, and facial expressions. Approach every conversation with the intent to understand the meaning of the other person’s words, not to craft a quick reply.
- **Be honest and authentic:** Share your own thoughts and viewpoints with your team.
- **Develop empathy over time:** Reflect on your experiences, ask for feedback, and take opportunities to strengthen your ability to relate to others.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** Encourage deeper conversations by asking questions and clarifying responses.
- **Set healthy boundaries:** As Palmer-Boeck shared, “Empathy doesn’t mean taking on everyone’s problems. It’s about understanding others while staying focused on the bigger picture.”
- **Validate others’ perspectives:** Be curious about other points of views. Even if you disagree, acknowledge others’ thoughts and feelings without judgment.
- **Adapt and learn:** After each major decision, ask yourself, “Did I consider every perspective?”
- **Practice self-awareness:** Recognize how your background, beliefs, and biases shape your perceptions. Taking time to reflect on your assumptions allows you to lead with greater empathy and avoid unintended conflict.

Meet the experts

Leading with understanding isn’t just a concept – it’s a practice. Thank you, Stacy and Diane, for sharing your real-world experience, strategies, and expertise to show how empathy strengthens relationships, improves decision-making, and drives better outcomes for teams, stakeholders, and suppliers.



Stacy Gregg, NIGP-CPP, CPPO, CPPB
Director of Procurement
South Carolina State University



Diane Palmer-Boeck, CPPO, PPMC
Founder and Principal Consultant
Government Procurement and Leadership Solutions



Empathy is the foundation of procurement leadership that works.

Summary

Empathy is the foundation of procurement leadership that works. By practicing empathy every day – whether through active listening, balanced decision-making, or simple self-care – you’ll strengthen relationships, resolve conflicts, and unlock new opportunities.

Help when you need it.

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