

Intro ([00:00](#)):

Welcome to The Workplace Forward Podcast with your host, executive coach, Tegan Travado, founder and CEO of Bright Arrow Coaching. Are you a perpetually busy, always overstretched leader or executive who feels there's never time to keep up with leadership trends in an always changing landscape, much less self care? Workplace Forward will help you overcome both challenges and gain peace of mind. Through Teagan's conversations with executives, experts, authors, and innovators about their leadership journeys, you'll get quick hits of two things you need the most, essential insights to help navigate the future workplace and best practices on the more human side of leadership. So you're empowered to take care of yourself while leading others. Enjoy some well deserved time for yourself to learn and recharge. Let's get started with today's guest. Tegan, take it away.

Tegan Travado ([00:55](#)):

Liesel Mertes is an acclaimed workplace empathy expert. Having experienced her own loss and struggle, Liesel emerged with a deep understanding of what employees need to feel supported at work after a disruptive life event. As the founder of Handle With Care, Liesel works with groups that want to boost employee engagement as well as attract and retain better talent. Liesel works with companies spanning across industry. Her favorite clients are forward thinking organizations who know the value of supporting their employees with empathy and compassion. While her expertise is broad, loss, returning to work, cultivating resilience, compassion fatigue, and how empathy impacts the brain, and no disruption is considered less significant. On these topics, Liesel is a dedicated speaker, writer, consultant, and host of the Handle With Care podcast. She earned her bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in business administration. She's worked in Nairobi, consulted in Fiji, and led cohorts in Ghana. Her favorite adventures brought her to Indiana where she's a proud mother, wife, and lover of time spent on the water. Through her actionable strategies, real life stories and passionate commitment, Liesel helps people survive, stabilize, and thrive in the aftermath of adversity and this is why we are excited to welcome you, Liesel, today to The Workplace Forward Podcast. Thank you for joining us.

Liesel Mertes ([02:17](#)):

I'm so glad to be with you this morning.

Tegan Travado ([02:19](#)):

To kick things off, let's set the stage with the foundation of what empathy is. So tell us what is empathy and then also how is it different from compassion because we often hear the two confused?

Liesel Mertes ([02:33](#)):

Yes. Well, it's a great question. Empathy, I'll get to the definition, but empathy, let me just frame it as it's really important for surviving the world that we find ourselves in right now where we are faced and our people are faced with this cascade of disruptive life events. Some of them are shared. We are all going through a pandemic together. Some of them are vastly different. People have had parents die, they have had long quarantines, they have had relationships fall apart. And empathy helps to bridge that gap because lots of times we feel intuitively we can connect with people who we have shared experiences with, but empathy is not about shared experiences.

Liesel Mertes ([03:14](#)):

Dr. Brene Brown talks about how empathy is about sharing the emotions that underpin the experience. I find that to be really helpful because it's a way for people to be able to connect, again, not to think like, Oh, now I understand everything that you've gone through, but if you think I haven't experienced having a parent die, I don't know what it's like. I'll never know what it's like. All of those mental pivots draw us away from people, whereas empathy, trying to get closer to the emotions that underpin the experience, instead considering what they might be feeling, which is an act of imagination, to say they might be feeling sad or overwhelmed or lonely. And we all have felt those things and we can know what has been helpful and not helpful in those situations. So it's that movement of getting us closer to the experience.

Liesel Mertes ([04:06](#)):

And as to the second part of your question, the distinction between compassion and empathy. There are some people that feel like that is a very important distinction. They really want the terms to be clear. I think that we are under practiced in both.

Tegan Travado ([04:19](#)):

Sure.

Liesel Mertes ([04:20](#)):

And it's important to talk about each of them. Empathy is identifying with feelings, the experience. It should lead to compassion. Compassion is the gestures towards people based on our minds, hearts, feelings being stirred in their direction. I say within my sessions, empathy should always lead to action. If it's just a mental or an emotional exercise, that doesn't go anywhere else, if it doesn't lead into compassion, we're not teaching or practicing it fully. So I think they're definitely related and for some people that's a very meaningful distinction. I think, hey, if we're talking about whether we name it empathy or compassion, it is necessary in our world and workplaces today.

Tegan Travado ([05:00](#)):

Yeah, wonderful. Great distinction. And what comes up for me too is we can practice empathy more broadly with people. And we think about politically, socially, things that we are all very polarized about right now, empathy is a great practice to try. It may not always lead us to action like compassion would, right? So there for me is a small distinction, but certainly in the workplace I like the thinking of practice empathy and let it lead you to compassion, that place of action because we do need that at work for sure.

Liesel Mertes ([05:31](#)):

Absolutely.

Tegan Travado ([05:31](#)):

Yeah. Why is it so important in the workplace right now? Take us through the journey of the leader and why leaders need to have this, can we call it a skill? Can empathy be skill?

Liesel Mertes ([05:42](#)):

Yes.

Tegan Travado ([05:42](#)):

Okay. Let's call it a skill.

Liesel Mertes (05:42):

You should call it a skill because all too often we name it as a fixed personality trait. I think in many places that I find we're used to talking about, well, Susan is really empathetic and George in sales just isn't. And we see it as some people have it, some people don't. And we shrug our shoulders.

Tegan Travado (06:01):

Great point.

Liesel Mertes (06:01):

Instead seeing it, yeah, like so many things that we teach and equip our people for in the workplace, if we believe it affects our people and our bottom line. And it does, we'll get to that in answering your question, we would see it as something to skill our people up in as a competency that yes, some people are more advanced on the spectrum, but everybody can grow in this.

Liesel Mertes (06:23):

Why is it important? Well, it's really important and let me come at that by some common objections that I hear, whether that's in my selling process or my pre and post session surveys, there are a couple of themes that get to the importance. One, a first question that can come up is really, okay, this sounds good, but does it really affect my bottom line? Does it get to the business of business or is it just something that we're doing for PR or because it's of the moment? Really it does affect your bottom line and the social science data points keep coming out to support that. Whether that is a Harvard Business Study Review article that just came out that was talking about how it links to a decrease in work absences to an increase in just overall work life balance and thriving. It is related to what your people want. It affects your productivity because it deals with the stickiness of how you're able to attract and retain talent.

Liesel Mertes (07:24):

Business solver is doing great work around this in their empathy at work survey and the 2020 numbers were, it was 82% said that they would switch jobs for increased empathy. 76% of respondents directly linked it to their productivity, whether it was there or not. When the executive team was surveyed in these various companies, only 50% of them agreed, which is this widening gap between what people want and what leadership thinks that they want. Even in the language of surviving, stabilizing, and thriving, if we were to get into some of the brain science of this, empathy, seeing somebody else's overwhelm or their sense of calm actually affects a part of our brain called the mirror neurons, that when we're stressed out, the interaction between our lower brain, our fight and flight, and our cognitive brain that allows us to write pleasant emails and deal well with clients like that free flow of information is inhibited. We are in survival mode when we're going through a disruptive life event.

Liesel Mertes (08:27):

And actually at the level of brain science, how empathy helps people get back to being able to do business is empathy and somebody else's calm, their identification, their ability to say, You know what? I believe in you and I'm here for you, actually activates, like even just seeing and experiencing that activates a part of our brain that helps that free flow of information. It helps our whole brain to get back online. And you don't have to believe me, this is the scientists that watch the primates hooked up and

they've seen it in people actually at the very fundamental level of our physiology. If you want your people to still be able to do their work in the midst of COVID, grow in your capacity for empathy, because the reality is we can't just stuff these things or make them go away or say just have to keep persevering and pushing through. We do have to do some measure of that, but really what will help your people most is being able to come alongside them with some empathy.

Tegan Travado ([09:24](#)):

Yeah. As you're talking about this and we have naturally framed this, which is appropriate for this podcast and the work you do as how leaders can be more empathetic and why that's important. And as we're talking about it, what keeps coming up for me is my gosh, how much leaders need a little empathy reciprocated to them.

Liesel Mertes ([09:43](#)):

Yes.

Tegan Travado ([09:44](#)):

This is such a challenging time to be a leader. It has been now for years, always was, now it's just exponentially more difficult. If leaders can model this, they'll naturally receive it back because people will try the same thing for them, right?

Liesel Mertes ([09:59](#)):

Yes.

Tegan Travado ([10:00](#)):

So I just want to put that little punctuation point in there because we're going to continue to talk about why this is important for leaders to model. And my heart is just like, oh gosh, I want this for my leaders that I coach so badly. I want them to be seen and I want their people to empathize with their struggles as a leader through these times as well.

Liesel Mertes ([10:18](#)):

Yes. Well and that's some of the good work that makes your coaches so successful and why people come to good coaching and why they need it and it's not just in the workplace, it's in our human relationships and empathy, this is another part of the training that I do about boundaries and change in compassion fatigue, like empathy does, it takes a level of attention and care. It is rarely going to come at some convenient moment where have, everything has been zen and you've gotten 10 hours of sleep.

Tegan Travado ([10:52](#)):

Right.

Liesel Mertes ([10:52](#)):

You have your tea. It's going to come in busy days where you're overwhelmed and it's part of that growth trajectory of people to say it does take something. And because of that, I want to have people who can pour this into my life. And if I don't, where can that come from? And how can I be part of cultivating that in my environments more so I'm not just always giving it, but also receiving it. Because if

the last two years has taught us anything. We know that those around us need it because we know that we have needed it too.

Tegan Travado ([11:23](#)):

Yes, Yes. And the disruptive life events have evolved so much. We used to a few years ago, be able to talk about the exceptions that would happen at work when someone's spouse had cancer or they had cancer or a loved one passes. But now this has touched all of us. And disruptive life events can even include that the children's school closed for two weeks because of a COVID exposure. Now the kids are at home while you're trying to work and you literally cannot have them out of your sight because they're too young but you have to keep your work call. That is stressful. And the workplace trauma, which can include things like layoffs, there's trauma even at work. So it's not just struggling at home. Even our workplace can be traumatic, which workplace psychologists include things like layoffs or org changes and change fatigue. So to your point, we all need it.

Liesel Mertes ([12:18](#)):

Yeah. And let me layer on, so in my sessions I'll use the language of disruptive life events. I also talk about how we have all experienced grief this year and like-

Tegan Travado ([12:29](#)):

Oh, have we ever.

Liesel Mertes ([12:31](#)):

Yeah, and that's a word that classically we attach to people in black and funerals. And it certainly applies when people die. But I'll put up a slide that talks about grief as unrealized expectations. And when we use that, when people start talking about that, whether that was for me sending off my baby who is a kindergartner and knowing that kindergarten was going to be so different and he wasn't going to hold hands and he wasn't going to play red rover, which was never a great game because people broke their arms in that. But all of the things, and it's not just one, it's that cascade of reckoning with this pile of unrealized expectations that it's almost like the exhalation of being like that is grief, that's why it's taking its toll.

Liesel Mertes ([13:16](#)):

And I have to quickly encourage people, and even listeners right now, sometimes people begin to tip over to naming their grief, but they automatically backpedal and they think, Oh, it's not that bad. It could be worse. It could be. And that distancing doesn't allow us to actually reckon with the fullness. Comparative grief is always a dead end street. For whatever is coming to mind, it did cause you grief and it does and you don't have to be stuck in that. But just to be able to name it and allow it its weight is something that I want to equip people to be able to do for other people, not to be second, like was that really sad? Are you really going through? Just be able to say if it was hard for you, it was hard and let's work on helping you stabilize and return to thriving. So whatever comes to mind, it was a grief for you and it's important to give that space to breathe.

Tegan Travado ([14:08](#)):

I'm curious as you're working with clients or individually or teams on this topic, since empathy is about us trying to connect with the emotions others are experiencing, how well are you finding people are able to even identify emotions? Let's forget accuracy because that's a whole other level of emotion, but

talk to me a little bit about that discovery process with clients for them to even acknowledge, oh, this is an emotional experience, much less be able to name what the emotion is accurately. So talk about that a little bit.

Liesel Mertes ([14:41](#)):

That is a great question. It's a whole session in and of itself to talk about it.

Tegan Travado ([14:47](#)):

I'm sure.

Liesel Mertes ([14:48](#)):

There's a handful of people who perhaps because of the work they've done in counseling, perhaps because of their personality disposition, they have a wide vocabulary of emotions. They can identify them easily within themselves. Many of us are not at that evolved place of knowing and naming our emotions. Let's start with, especially in the workplace, the basic realization there's a very small handful of emotions that we feel like we are allowed to feel at work.

Tegan Travado ([15:14](#)):

Authorized. Yes.

Liesel Mertes ([15:15](#)):

You can definitely feel happy. That's what we expect. How are you doing? I'm great. How about you? You can feel very, very occasionally sad, but you need to quickly get over it. And frankly, especially white men are allowed to be angry.

Tegan Travado ([15:31](#)):

Yes.

Liesel Mertes ([15:31](#)):

Very few other people are.

Tegan Travado ([15:33](#)):

There's studies on this by the way. So Liesel is speaking through some science. Yep, I've read it too. Yes.

Liesel Mertes ([15:38](#)):

And that's a very limited range.

Tegan Travado ([15:41](#)):

Yeah.

Liesel Mertes ([15:42](#)):

So what does it mean to actually consider what emotions are going on? It is helpful in our interactions because sometimes we are functioning out of an emotional place and if we don't realize like, Oh, I'm actually very frustrated right now, that's why I want to snap at that person for being two days late on

the, I'm super frustrated right now. It helps inform our interactions better to get to more of this fluency. How do people do it? There are a number of ways. For me, even though I teach empathy, I'm great at picking up other people's emotions, I am way underdeveloped in paying attention to my own before they have flooded me.

Liesel Mertes ([16:21](#)):

So I have a visual reminder. We put it up in the house during COVID. It is a concentric circles, it names all kinds of emotions stemming from a core of five of them. You can look, like the children do it, I do it. It's a great visual reminder to really just, I mean this is what they do in elementary school classrooms with all the faces on the wall to be able to say, maybe you're discouraged, maybe you're resigned, maybe you're hopeful. Another thing that I do with people is to pay attention to their bodies. Sometimes we don't have a concept emotion in mind, but our bodies are truth tellers that we can start paying attention to some of our bodily tells.

Tegan Travado ([16:59](#)):

Yes.

Liesel Mertes ([16:59](#)):

For me, when I am, because I'm great at persevering, I am very good at just barreling onward to get a job done, which serves me until it doesn't. But when I know I'm doing it, I feel it in my neck and my shoulders, I'll be like, Oh my gosh, I am so uncomfortable. I'm aching because I've been, like, my body has literally been tensing and holding it there. That's why we have so many turns of phrase, I'm sick at heart, I feel queasy. I'm sick to my stomach. Even our language represents that.

Tegan Travado ([17:32](#)):

Right.

Liesel Mertes ([17:33](#)):

So we've been helping people be able to pay attention. Okay, in the course of your day, when are you starting to feel your body and what might that be telling you is a great way. And a final thing, the people that you live closely with or work closely with, if you want to have a vulnerable conversation, you can start asking them about the emotions that they perceive from you in different meetings. And that can be a great leading indicator as well.

Tegan Travado ([18:00](#)):

As long as you're truly open to hearing the answer and we are not arguing with them about the feedback you asked for.

Liesel Mertes ([18:05](#)):

Is not to be taken lightly and you should do it at a moment where you're not emotionally flooded. Because that only leads to more flooding.

Tegan Travado ([18:17](#)):

Yes. Thank you for that. You mentioned in school we give children these tools to identify their emotions. I will share that even some executives in their sixties that I'm working with are like, Can you send me the feeling wheel you mentioned? Right?

Liesel Mertes ([18:34](#)):

Yeah.

Tegan Travado ([18:34](#)):

So the feeling wheel is very much what you're talking about. There's the four or five core emotions, but then there's dozens of emotions that are related to each of those core emotions. And I'm finding the last couple of years I have been sharing that resource a lot in my work as well.

Liesel Mertes ([18:48](#)):

Yes.

Tegan Travado ([18:48](#)):

And likewise with you saying you've got your own work there, so do I. I mean we wouldn't be very good coaches if we weren't aware of our own journey with emotions. But I've personally found it so enriching to keep revisiting that through my clients, also for myself. Because to your point, then we can see what's happening for others so much more easily.

Liesel Mertes ([19:10](#)):

Yes.

Tegan Travado ([19:11](#)):

And also as you've talked about, some of the struggles folks around us may be experiencing at work, they may not yet know what they're feeling because they're in a time of crisis. So I love that you're talking about we have to imagine they must be so sad or they must be so angry when we're in a traumatic state or a very stressed state. We may not be in touch with that yet. So it's really helpful when the people around us are anticipating connecting with us or serving us by being able to see about us, what we can't see for ourselves yet in the stressful time.

Liesel Mertes ([19:44](#)):

And then in that being able to extend to people a gentle place to land because you're not at your best self when you're stressed out. And sometimes in beginning this work, people will think, Okay, I'm going to reach out, I'm going to ask them how they're doing. And then they think, but they didn't want to tell me, they didn't even respond. The person who is trying to practice empathy in a sideways way makes it about themselves again.

Tegan Travado ([20:09](#)):

Right.

Liesel Mertes ([20:09](#)):

I wanted a response. I wanted to feel good about myself for being an empathetic person and you didn't reflect that back to me. Instead of being like, you know what, the important thing is that you display that

care, whether they want to take you up on it in that moment or not that you, and especially like that you are in it for the journey. You can offer once, they might not take you up on it, put it in your calendar if you're their boss to check in again the next week. And just to have that consistency.

Liesel Mertes ([20:38](#)):

And even as I say that, that can be hard to do, but it's really being able to, like I had a situation to practice empathy recently where actually the person that I was needing to give it to, they had hurt my feelings just the day before and I didn't think that they were doing the state. And just to be like, You know what? I can do my own work on whatever this is bringing about in me. I don't have to reflect it back to them.

Tegan Travado ([21:01](#)):

Right.

Liesel Mertes ([21:01](#)):

I want to just be about, they've got way more going on and I have other support systems. I don't have to bring it to bear on them right now.

Tegan Travado ([21:09](#)):

Yes, beautiful point. You kind of brought up a good point of what might get in the way when we're trying to demonstrate empathy. So one of those being our own emotional state and maybe a recent experience we had with someone. What else do you observe getting in the way of leaders and teams demonstrating empathy well?

Liesel Mertes ([21:29](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. I like to teach this through the lens of what I call empathy avatars, which are sticky, memorable ways to look at what we have in our empathy toolkits because we all come to this given moment at whatever moment you're listening to this podcast with a certain set of tools in our toolkit. And the question is, are they serving us well or do we need to put better tools in? And those tools are conditioned by life experience, by bent of personality. You might unconsciously, you're just doing it. You are saying the same thing that somebody said to you when you were eight years old at your grandmother's funeral, which was just tomorrow's another day. And we just got to keep on keeping on. And because these situations are hard, they're freighted, they normally are tied to some emotional trauma on our point. We don't want to revisit them. So we just find ourselves-

Tegan Travado ([22:24](#)):

Avoid.

Liesel Mertes ([22:25](#)):

Yeah, we avoid it. We're acting against that. We're embracing it. We're not bringing attention to it. So there are some default postures that I find people easily fall into. You cannot practice empathy because you are so focused on, you're a positive person, you bring a lot of positive energy to the workplace and you fear that engaging with this is going to pull the other person down. They'll never get out of it. It will sideline productivity. You'll never, And so you find yourself being a cheer up Cheryl, which just wants to give out a platitude. You want the other person to be better. You're almost forcing them to be, and that

inhibits connection. Or out of that same place, you might be a joking Julie, sometimes turn into jackass Jared, if you want a little bit spicier language, which is-

Tegan Travado ([23:15](#)):

We like spicy language on this podcast.

Liesel Mertes ([23:17](#)):

Yeah, jackass Jared is going to make a joke about their experience or about somebody else's. Just this happens, especially in male cohorts of, Hey, we might name something hard, but we're instantly going to pivot to why it's hilarious or sarcastic. And so that move actually communicates to the other person, You can't hold this with me and I'm probably not going to tell you again. Another thing that can get in the way is especially there's an overriding ethos, but also a personal manifestation within the workplace of if we start doing this, we're never going to stop. We'll never get back to work. If I give space for this, is it going to just be a Pandora's box and then I'm going to have to be a counselor and I'm not a trained counselor. As a side note, you don't and should not be that.

Tegan Travado ([24:06](#)):

Right.

Liesel Mertes ([24:06](#)):

You should have a basic set of skills to help stabilize someone to whatever next level of care they might need or they might just need that basic care. But that can manifest itself in a buck Bobby energy. And this is really a prevailing mindset of an older generation, which was like, home is for home, work is for work. We just have to keep on keeping on. We have no time for this. If somebody tells you something hard, you will shut them down and be like, You know what? We've got a meeting and we'll talk about that offline. So yeah, there's about five others that can really get in the way. But learning where we are disposed to go, you might be a commiserating Candace, always with your own story, which feels like hijacking the conversation. Somebody tells you and you're a verbal connector and you think that that'll be helpful, but suddenly it's all about you. This happens especially to minorities in the workplace when we share about disruption. Yeah. And the more I teach this, I used to think I was just one or two of these manifestations. I can be all of them, but I know when I'm slipping into that. Now I can see the signs and be like, I'm being a fix it Frank right now. I know that doesn't serve me. What do I need to incorporate differently?

Tegan Travado ([25:18](#)):

Yeah. I will tell listeners, I took Liesel's training out of a place of, I'm modeling empathy a lot as an executive coach, what might I not know? How can I tune this muscle up right now? Because I think it was, was it last year I took it or earlier this year.

Liesel Mertes ([25:36](#)):

Time is a construct. Who knows?

Tegan Travado ([25:38](#)):

The last two years has just been one big year. I don't even know anymore.

Liesel Mertes ([25:41](#)):

It was during the pandemic.

Tegan Travado ([25:43](#)):

Well, yeah, it sure was. So I just want to share with listeners, well, I was lucky to get on a cohort of mixed company from all kinds of different organizations. I know you go in and do this inside of organizations most often, but I learned a ton and I identify with what you're saying about you could be all of those avatars. I certainly became aware of that for myself, which allows me now to check in on like, okay, I'm hearing something that touches my own pain. I've been through that too, but that's not what this is about. How do I transcend that and really make it about them? And I think one of my, I just for sure am better at demonstrating empathy for people in my work and personal life in terms of just taking an action.

Tegan Travado ([26:27](#)):

I think one of the things I realized after taking your training is I was always good at offering support. Hey, let me know what I can do. Checking back in, Hey, what else do you need right now? And what I learned through this training was sometimes we need to take a run at guessing what they need and offering that up, because when people are in times of distress, they can't think about that. They don't need another thing to iron out details for. So I'm better about just sending the DoorDash gift card or sending over the food and saying, "Is Tuesday a good night? I'm sending you dinner." Instead of saying, "What can I do? What can I do?" So that was such an upgrade for me and in the people around me. So I thank you for that, and that's just scratching the surface because now I've got these avatars in my mind when I'm working with leaders about helping them also identify where their empathy can use some shoring up. So I highly recommend the experience and thank you, Liesel. It was really a wonderful upgrade for me. So I appreciate it.

Liesel Mertes ([27:23](#)):

Loved having you as a part of that group. And a big goal of the work that I do, it's conceptual, but if that doesn't lead to action, I'm not really being helpful. So someone actually from that same cohort I was able to touch base with within the last month, and they described a group they were leading, they're naturally attuned, but they saw somebody in the group who just seemed a little bit withdrawn. This was a group of leaders. And she said, Because of some of the conversations we had, I thought to myself, I as a good leader, I'm going to check in and just ask, Hey, I notice is there anything going on? And this participant said, "Well, today is actually the anniversary of a child's death in my home." This person that had a teenage child who had died a couple of years previous and they were marking the day.

Liesel Mertes ([28:13](#)):

And this individual who was responding said, and I remembered what you said, that one of the best things in those situations is just to be able, there's all kinds of places we go, even if you don't know what to say, just to be able to say, That sounds so hard, so she said that and then she offered that. Would you like to tell me more right now?

Tegan Travado ([28:34](#)):

Yes.

Liesel Mertes ([28:35](#)):

And people might not always want to take you up on it. It's not a demand. But a lot of times, especially in situations like that, somebody, they have this years of history that is coming to bear on their day. And she said, when I said, Tell me more, she said, You wouldn't believe it. This woman, it was like she said, So few people ever ask about her. And this woman was able to hold a part of that story and she said, Now it has deepened our relationship so much more. This woman said how meaningful it was. And you think about it, that is not rocket science. We're just not conditioned to do that because we're here and we freeze up and we think, Oh no, that's so crappy. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. And just to even have that basic, tell me more, and then to be available for whatever that person might want to give can be really beautiful.

Tegan Travado ([29:25](#)):

Yeah. It was awesome In the training to watch, well, we had to all practice these questions with each other in our real scenarios. And what I love, and I'll share this for listeners, there really are just a core set of a few questions and gestures you can develop, through this training or otherwise, so that you have your safe go to, it's an arsenal, it's an empathy arsenal. You know what to do. There's three questions I'll always ask. There's three actions I'll always take, and I will tell you Liesel, in coaching execs, the ones who are most loved are a vault for these things.

Tegan Travado ([30:01](#)):

To your point, they are not being therapists. They know they're not qualified. They are not fielding multiple, Here's what happened to my family conversations every single week from their employees, but they are that soft space to land. And the leaders have just created this perfect balance of I'm here for you, my heart is open. Let's take some steps together today so you can go do your best work. Because often work is the safe place for people to go when they're struggling and they just need a one time or a couple conversations with someone who knows what they're doing from an empathy perspective and they're ready to go. They're ready to move on, they feel held. So what are some other tips you can give us to start practicing right away and incorporate more empathy into our leadership?

Liesel Mertes ([30:47](#)):

Yes. Well, especially for those that are leading people, I'm going to give you two phrases to avoid and then something to just build into your calendar. You touched on it, let me know what I can do to help. That is one that feels good and it is better than nothing. Even in giving these tips. Let me just encourage you, this is a little bit like bumpers on a bowling alley. I want to keep you out of the gutter. It's not about being perfect.

Tegan Travado ([31:13](#)):

Perfect. That's great. I love it.

Liesel Mertes ([31:16](#)):

Perfection is a construct that will hold you back. It's about getting better in these things. To be present, not perfect. But there are things that they're just our go-to phrases and they're less than helpful. So instead of saying, Let me know what I can do to help. To be able to, so in my sessions I have an empathy menu of typical ways. Some people like to help through actions. They're the sort of people who they would say, "Hey, we've got that project coming up. Can I take this part of the deliverable and just do it for you?" Or they'll buy you a gas card or things like that. There are people who are really good at being available, if you want to talk about this, let's take a half hour walk. Or there are people who love to bake

and they're really good. They're people who they're great for, Hey, let's hang out for movie night, and you just don't have to think about it.

Liesel Mertes ([32:02](#)):

But knowing in your personal and your professional life, some things that you can give in good faith and easily to be able to offer something specific. Because again, the vague offer, like we had an active COVID case in my house within the last couple of weeks, my husband and daughter. And there were lots of people who said, Just let me know how I can help. And it's just like somebody walks that line of I don't want to overburden you, or what if I ask but that actually seems too expensive. There's all kinds of reasons why that just feels exhausting and you never take them up on it. Another thing to avoid saying is don't say take all the time you need, because you don't mean it. You don't mean it.

Tegan Travado ([32:44](#)):

That's right. You don't mean that worker can't work.

Liesel Mertes ([32:45](#)):

You don't mean it. You can't mean it. And actually it introduces ambiguity into a situation and puts the onus back on the other person. They know you don't mean it, but they don't know how far your intention stretches. So then they exist within, Can I take two days off? Can I take a week off? How often do I have to be back in touch? It is much better leadership to know how much time you can give. 72 hours. Don't pick up a phone, don't respond to an email. We'll touch base then and talk about next steps. That also buys you time to check with HR to look at your workflow and it shows that you are shepherding the relationship and it's not on the other person.

Tegan Travado ([33:24](#)):

Yeah.

Liesel Mertes ([33:25](#)):

Another great thing to do is to start building your care and intention into your calendar. Anything that is important in your life shows up there. We all know it. And you can be a person of good intention right now thinking about it and a dozen other things are going to come to your plate and it's going to be hard to remember. So you can pause right now, you can think about someone on your team or in your life who would benefit from a call or a text. Hey, I know this is a hard time for you. I just want to check in, see how you're doing, tell you I'm thinking.

Liesel Mertes ([34:00](#)):

It doesn't have to be prose or something magnificent, just that intention. If you're in person stopping by their desk, if you want to up your level, there are some key holidays that are always hard for people. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day, keep a running calendar reminder, I do this, of people that you want to reach out to just basically week before this sort of care is why people stay at companies 10 years later because they say, Wow, they remembered that from me and they reached out. Those are some really basic things to do. Avoid cliches really, if you find yourself saying at least a lot, drop that phrase.

Tegan Travado ([34:42](#)):

Oh yeah.

Liesel Mertes ([34:43](#)):

Part of the reason I'm in this work is out of my own personal disruptive life event, I had a child die. Something that I would hear is at least you still have Ada and Magnus who are still alive, which was observably true. It was way better to only have one child dead than all three.

Tegan Travado ([35:00](#)):

Oh God, just hearing you say it, put it all out there. It's just like oh gosh.

Liesel Mertes ([35:04](#)):

Yeah, when you dissect, you're like, oh yeah, that's not foundationally super comforting.

Tegan Travado ([35:10](#)):

No.

Liesel Mertes ([35:10](#)):

That's like an extreme example, but anytime we're doing at least, a person is either concluding, you are forcing me to be somewhere where I'm not, therefore I'm not going to share with you. And I just feel crappy.

Tegan Travado ([35:23](#)):

Yeah.

Liesel Mertes ([35:23](#)):

So those are just a couple to consider.

Tegan Travado ([35:26](#)):

And what strikes me is these might sound small, but they're so meaningful and that's the entire point of empathy. We are not asking for back flips. It is a series of small things that make life changing difference in someone's life personally, but in talent retention and in company culture and where people want to stay.

Liesel Mertes ([35:47](#)):

They're not high cost or high touch, and I know you're saying, but even like here's another basic one, Go to Target or get a box of your branded company stationary. Keep it in your desk with stamps. Not every person who has something hard happen is going to love a card, but if a card is meaningful to 65% of your people and it takes you a minute and a half to write and address it's worth just doing it every time. This is just what I do.

Tegan Travado ([36:17](#)):

Yeah.

Liesel Mertes ([36:17](#)):

Because they're not high cost or high touch.

Tegan Travado ([36:20](#)):

Beautiful. I love it. Liesel, if listeners want to find out more about you or the training we've talked about today, where can they find you online?

Liesel Mertes ([36:29](#)):

You should come to my website, which is [www.lieselmertes.com](http://www.lieselmertes.com). Liesel is spelled like diesel, but with an L. That's a easy phonic device. And there's a tab right on most pages to just schedule a free consultation. You can see some of the great podcast interviews. Tegan was actually a guest in season two of the podcast.

Tegan Travado ([36:51](#)):

It was so fun. Thank you.

Liesel Mertes ([36:53](#)):

So if you love hearing her voice along with other leaders, that's a great resource. But yeah, love to talk about options that would be a great fit. I'm also on LinkedIn as Liesel Mertes, and on Instagram as LieselJoy, and if you go there, you'll see some occasional photos of my kids too.

Tegan Travado ([37:12](#)):

Gorgeous family, lovely family. I will make sure we put all of those ways we could reach you in the show notes for listeners as well. So thank you for that.

Liesel Mertes ([37:19](#)):

One more thing, it's worth the noting. I'm also, I mean I mentioned it. I'm the host of the Handle with Care Empathy at Work podcast, which is on Spotify, Google Play, some of your Apple Podcasts, this great resource. Season one has people sharing a behind the scenes look at workplace disruption. What were they really feeling? What was the stupid thing that a coworker said that just devastated them for two weeks? What was really good that was transformative? It's the story you rarely get along a range of disruptive life experiences from alcoholism to suicide to miscarriage. Season two has a great lineup of leaders talking about how they cultivated this during COVID. So that's a great resource as well. It's great because my guests are so great and I'm along for the ride.

Tegan Travado ([38:07](#)):

I can really identify with that my friend, as a podcast host. I'm a lifelong learner and podcasting is such a fabulous way to do that. Right? It sounds like that's kind of where you're coming from as well. Super fun.

Liesel Mertes ([38:19](#)):

100 percent.

Tegan Travado ([38:20](#)):

So we'll include a link to that podcast as well. So thank you. So this podcast, The Workplace Forward Podcast, as you know, Liesel, was created to discover what behaviors, practices, beliefs, and skills the future leader needs to possess so that they can successfully lead these systems we've talked about that

are changing at warp speed and they're going to continue changing at warp speed. So to get your read on what's required of future leaders, let's have you finish this sentence. Leaders of the future will...

Liesel Mertes ([38:50](#)):

Practice empathy as a meaningful and integral part of the way they go about their workplace encounters.

Tegan Travado ([39:00](#)):

Perfect.

Liesel Mertes ([39:01](#)):

You can make it shorter and just say, will keep perfecting the skill of empathy and how we use it. And I mean, it's not just something to deploy for the good of your workplace. It will make you a better, more connected person. And especially for those who are committed to growth and connection. It's a vital skillset and Forbes just named it as the number one skillset that you need for 2022. So even you're only driven by an economic imperative.

Tegan Travado ([39:28](#)):

Right.

Liesel Mertes ([39:29](#)):

Forbes is telling you to develop it.

Tegan Travado ([39:31](#)):

So if all of our main sources of info or saying empathy is a thing you need to have, maybe we should sit up and listen.

Liesel Mertes ([39:40](#)):

Right? Well, it is the way forward for divided families, communities, workplaces. It's not just something touchy feely. It actually brings us closer. I do a whole session on empathy and hard conversations. It doesn't fix everything. It does make us better in the process.

Tegan Travado ([39:58](#)):

Yeah. Fantastic. Liesel, thank you so much for joining us today. It has truly been enlightening. I'm so excited for our listenership to have gotten this deeper dive than you can get anywhere else and the actionable items they can just take away and start practicing right now. So thanks so much for joining us.

Liesel Mertes ([40:16](#)):

It was a pleasure.

Speaker 1 ([40:17](#)):

Thanks for listening to this episode of The Workplace Forward Podcast, where leaders and executives can stay ahead of the curve on emerging leadership ideas and self care best practices. Guided by executive coach Tegan Travado and her expert guests, please take 60 seconds to help others discover

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