**The role of empathy in developing internal communication at work:
Company X**

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the critical role of empathy in fostering effective internal communication within the workplace. The study aims to explore how empathy influences the communication dynamics within an organization and its impact on employee engagement, satisfaction, and overall organizational culture.

The research methodology employed in this study combines a comprehensive literature review and qualitative research method. The theoretical framework encompasses the history and definition of empathy, its connection to interpersonal communication, and its relevance to leadership and organizational culture. Through the survey the study investigates the current manifestation of empathy in the organizational culture and explores how individuals perceive and practice empathy in their communication interactions.

The findings reveal the significance of empathy in creating an open and supportive communication environment. Employees express the importance of understanding others' perspectives, considering diverse life situations, and active listening. These elements form the foundation of empathetic communication, which fosters trust, collaboration, and a sense of belonging within the organization. Moreover, the study identifies potential areas for improvement in internal communication practices, based on the understanding of empathy levels and perceptions among employees.

The results of this research contribute to the growing body of knowledge on empathy and its impact on internal communication within organizations. The findings can inform leaders, managers, and human resources professionals in developing strategies to foster a more empathetic communication culture, ultimately improving employee satisfaction, productivity, and overall organizational success.

Key words
Internal communication, organizational communication, well-being, leadership.

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1   Introduction

As someone who has always been intrigued by the topic of communication, I have invested effort in observing and analysing various communication processes in my own life. It is fascinated to witness the evolution of humanistic values, awareness, and acceptance as the fundamental principals of communication over time. It is also noteworthy how people have begun to scrutinize communication processes more deeply, not only in personal relationships, but also in formal contexts such as the workplace, where colleagues who may lack any personal connection are brought together by their common work environment, whether in large or small organizations.

The deep interest in development of communication processes at a workplace is not surprising, because even if we have nothing in common with our colleagues, we spend most of the day interacting with each other in one way or another. Whether it's online communication, business meetings, coffee breaks, lunches, teamwork, or management reports - all these are parts of human communication processes in which everyone wants to feel comfortable, safe, and understood. Besides human communication has a constitutive role in the workplace: It is in workplace communication that the organization comes into being. Through workplace communication, we construct a joint understanding of important work-related issues. We aim at success, efficiency, and productivity at work by discussing, conversing, debating, providing, and receiving feedback. (Valo & Mikkola, 2020). The significant impact that communication has on our productivity, well-being and all organizational processes arouses true interest in a topic of development and improvement of people skills at work.

Thus, while doing my internship in a Company X as an administrative assistant and communicating with people at the workplace daily, I decided to devote my research to the topic of communication and explore more deeply the theories and concepts related to the well-being, psychological safeness, and development of interpersonal communication at the workplace.

In the preliminary discussion with an HR and Finance director of the focus organization, it was evident that there are some challenges related to internal communication, for instance related to efficiency of meetings, and openness and acceptance while giving or receiving feedback. Hence, I started by studying current trends in organizational psychology as well as doing my own observations on leaders and co-workers whose opinions carry the most weight, and with whom others, including myself, want to work. Based on my observation, I have reached a conclusion about these individuals. Their notable attribute is their capacity to prioritize others, which forms the basis of empathy - the ability to comprehend and share someone else's emotions (Steed, 2019). While empathy is an inherent aspect of human nature (Howe, 2013), there exist variances in empathy levels among individuals, and it is always possible to learn and enhance this trait further.

Thus, the focus of this research-oriented thesis is the study of empathy, the understanding of an employee's awareness of empathy, and the ability to learn empathy at the workplace. The result of the research, first, is beneficial for the focus organization that is a private small-to-medium size (SME) company operated in Finland, but the outcomes can be useful for any organization of any size and located anywhere in the world. Understanding the nuances of how empathy works in corporate culture is incredibly valuable because it will be a definition factor in how you approach situations at work. (Steed, 2019).

1.1 Research objectives and aims.

Empathy, which has a rich history rooted in the interpretation of emotions and art, is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various types. It is closely linked to emotional intelligence and the emotional culture of an organization. Thus, the main objective of this thesis focuses on understanding the role of empathy in developing internal communication in a workplace and the differences that people might have in perception of the empathy concept.

The aim of the research is to gather the employees' opinion about their perception of empathy and the current level of satisfaction with internal communication in the organization. This involves examining the types of communication barriers that exists and understanding how empathy can be used to overcome them. After shedding light on the possible communication problems, the purpose is to gather insights based on the employees' visions and possibly to create valuable recommendations on how the focus organization could evolve internal communication with empathy as a powerful tool for development.

1.2 Research questions

The research questions can be clarified as follows:

Main Research Question:
- What is the role of empathy in developing internal communication within the focus organization?

Sub-Research Questions:
- How is empathy currently manifested in the organizational culture of the focus organization?
- How do people in the organization perceive the concept of empathy?

These research questions are based on the challenges of work communication in the focus organization, the objectives and purposes of the study, and the acknowledgment that empathy is a

crucial factor in work communication and leadership. The preliminary discussion with the HR and Finance directors of the company highlighted the main challenge of work communication, which involves understanding and accepting individual differences in communication styles. Additional challenges, such as stress, uncertainty, misunderstandings, the complex role of leadership, and shared vision and motivation, will also be considered.

1.3   Research method

Since the objectives and aims of the research are related to understanding the empathy concept and how people perceive it, as well as measuring the current level of satisfaction with the internal communication among employees, the research method is qualitative with some quantitative elements. The practical application of the method will be carried out through a questionnaire which consists of open-ended and multiple-choices questions that are aimed to identify existing communication challenges, the level of awareness about concept of empathy, assessing both others and their own level of empathy and overall satisfaction with internal communication at Company X. The questions will also consider the frequency of presence in the office and the duration of work in the focus company.

As scholars say, the most common means of studying communication is using surveys. The strength of survey research is that it is the only way to find out how someone thinks, feels, or intends to behave. In other words, surveys capture people's perception. (Dainton, Zelley, 2015.)

1.4   Context and what is out of the focus.

The focus company is an SME with 30-40 employees on a permanent basis. The company has implemented a hybrid work model, which in this case means physical presence in the office and face-to-face communication at least once a week, except for those employees who are living outside of Finland. This study will not focus on the challenges of the remote work, but the fact that most of the communication is carried out on the Internet will be taken into consideration.

The company has a diverse workforce, with employees from various cultures. However, this thesis will not concentrate on multicultural communication or internationalization of the workplace as a research focus. Furthermore, the gender and age of the employees will also not be the primary focus of this research.

1.5   Thesis structure

The research is organized into three primary sections. The first section encompasses a theoretical framework that explores the historical background and definition of empathy, as well as its

correlation and impact on interpersonal communication. The second section details the application of the selected methodology, the analysis of its outcomes, and a discussion of the findings. Finally, the third and final section concludes the research by reflecting on the chosen research method, suggesting potential avenues for further exploration of the topic, and proposing areas for improvement.

2   What is empathy?

The concept of empathy is multifaceted and has undergone significant transformations over time. Contemporary perceptions of empathy differ greatly from its earlier meanings. According to Lanzoni (2018), a researcher on the history of the concept, the English word "empathy" emerged in 1908 as a translation of the German term "*Einfühlung*," which literally translates to "feeling-in." Two psychologists from Cornell and the University of Cambridge proposed the term "empathy" for "Einfühlung," drawing on the Greek "*em*" meaning "in" and "*pathos*" meaning "feeling." This suggested translation gained popularity and became widely adopted. In its early history, empathy did not primarily involve experiencing another person's emotions; rather, it referred to animating an object or projecting one's own imagined feelings onto the world. (Lanzoni, 2018).

But over time, empathy's definition began to shift and be more related to social science. Experimental psychologist R. Cartwright, in 1948, conducted some of the first tests measuring interpersonal empathy and deliberately rejected empathy's early meaning of imaginative projection. Instead, she emphasized interpersonal connection as the core of concept. In 1955, Reader's Digest defined the term, which was new to the public outside of academic world, as the "ability to appreciate the other person's feelings without yourself becoming so emotionally involved that your judgment is affected". (Lanzoni, 2018).

Nowadays, the social psychologist D. Batson, who has researched empathy for decades, argues that the term can now refer to eight different concepts: knowing another's thoughts and feelings; imagine another's thoughts and feelings; adopting the posture of another; actually feeling as another does; imagining how one would feel or think in another's place; feeling distress at another's suffering; feeling for another's suffering, sometimes called pity or compassion; and projecting oneself into another's situation. (Batson, 2009). One of the definitions that this research will refer to is.

 "Empathy is the ability to sense and understand what other people feel, see things from their point of view, and experience emotions that others might have gone through by putting oneself in their place. Empathy is the ability to be present. It's the ability to hold a safe space for others to feel their own emotions completely and to be able to understand their experience". (Pallapa, 2022).

It is noteworthy that some of the researchers point out the physical aspect of empathy: the fact that the experience of empathy starts in the body, we are physically able to feel the other's joy, fear, or sadness. The reason for that of course is because we share the same biology and the same senses, it means that we know at the physical level what it is to experience certain feelings. (Howe, 2013). Dr. Brene Brown (2018), a research professor at the University of Houston, said that empathy is a powerful way to connect to the other's person's emotion and make them realize that

they are not alone when they struggle. Sharon Steed in her report "Empathy at work" argue that psychologists and counsellors agree that a person requires three specific skills to have true empathy: "the ability to share another person's feelings; the cognitive ability to perceive what another person is feeling; and a "social beneficial" intention to respond compassionately to that person's distress". (Steed, 2019; Hatfield, Rapson, Le, 2009).

Different types of empathy

As we can see from the early history of the term to today's perception, empathy is a quite complex concept and it can include many different aspects related to human feelings and abilities to sense, understand and respond to emotions of another person. Looking deeper into definition and perception of the empathy term, researchers identify three types of empathy (Figure 1) that an individual might experience in different situation. Each of them plays a vital role in the way in which we interact with others. Some of these types we can say that we have by default as a human being, but some have different degrees of severity in different people and can be developed throughout life as a separate communication skill. Succinctly said, empathy could be seen as three processes: the simple cognitive ability to perceive, recognize and discriminate emotions of other person; the more complex cognitive skill of seeing things from the other person's perspective; and as the most developed process, is to have an emotionally response to others' feelings. (Howe, 2013).

Emotional empathy

The first type of empathy called *emotional empathy* or sometimes known as affective empathy or primitive empathy. This type we have inherently and start to develop at an early age, for example, when small children feel the mood of their mother and start beginning to experience similar feelings. Sharon Steed in her report says that the emotional empathy means having one person's emotions or behaviour mimicked in another person's emotions or behaviours. It is when we see someone smiling and then beginning to smile yourself. (Steed, 2019, chapter 1). This type of empathy allows us to build deep connection and understanding of another person, but at the same time this experience can be exhausting and energy draining.

In terms of organizational communication, emotional empathy is beneficial for leaders, because expressing this type of empathy increases trust and helps develop transparency and candour in relationship (Pallapa, 2022, chapter 4). Steed also points out that emotional empathy plays a major role in how we feel throughout the day. As the example she gives is the how strongly the personality of a leader affects the emotional statement of the team: if the leader is known as a very upbeat person who likes to have a little fun on the job the others tend to follow this mood, the same

applies to the situation on the contrary, for leaders who set more negative tones for their teams. (Steed, 2019).

Cognitive empathy

Cognitive empathy, also known as perspective taking, is the type of empathy that requires work. According to Hodges and Myers in the Encyclopaedia of Social Psychology, having more complete and accurate knowledge about the content of another person's mind, including how the person feels" (Hodges, Myers, 2007, p. 296-298). This type of empathy happens when a person is actively engaged in finding perspective to better understand a situation. (Steed, 2019, chapter 1). It is also important to consider that before we can start to imagine what it is like to be another person, some knowledge of the other's history, personality, circumstances and situation is necessary. (Howe, 2013). According to Pallapa, cognitive empathy is the ability to put oneself in the other person's shoes and rationally experience what the other person is going through. It involves being able to understand another person's mental state and what they might be thinking in response to the situation. This is related to what psychologists refer to as theory of mind or thinking about what other people are thinking. Cognitive empathy is contrived, wilful, and does not require any emotional investment. (Pallapa, 2022).

Considering all the above, it is important to take into account that this type of empathy faces significant problems in the situations where our views with another person differ radically. Steed argues that it is easy to have empathy to someone who is "like us" and we tend to defend those people even if they are wrong, we feel we know so much about them that we have a wealth of perspective on why they do what they do, hence, we can cognitively have empathy for our close people without much convincing. It is difficult to have empathy for those with whom we are don't identify, such a person might seem foreign and even is perceived as a threat, in which case people tend to show not empathy but defensive reaction (Steed, 2019).

In the organizational world cognitive empathy useful for leaders when they want to understand how their team members are feeling and how they can help them succeed (Pallapa, 2022). This is also the type of empathy that could be learned and developed as a useful communication skill through active listening, finding common emotional connections and rational and intelligent approach to communication.

Compassionate Empathy or Empathic concern

Steed called the third type of empathy empathic concern and defined it as an other-oriented emotion evoked by perceiving someone in need. (Steed, 2019, chapter 1). It is an emotional reaction characterized by such feelings as compassion, tenderness, softheartedness, and

sympathy. (Decety, Lamm, 2006). According to Pallapa, compassionate empathy is the most active form of empathy. It involves not only being concerned about another person and experiencing their emotional pain, but it also involves taking effective actions to help reduce the pain or origin of suffering. Compassionate empathy is wholesome – it considers an overall view of the person and their situation and tries to drive action. (Pallapa, 2022, chapter 4). It is the empathy when we are driven to act and help, to dedicate time and collaborate, when we are not just feeling or understanding but demonstration by acting compassionate empathy.
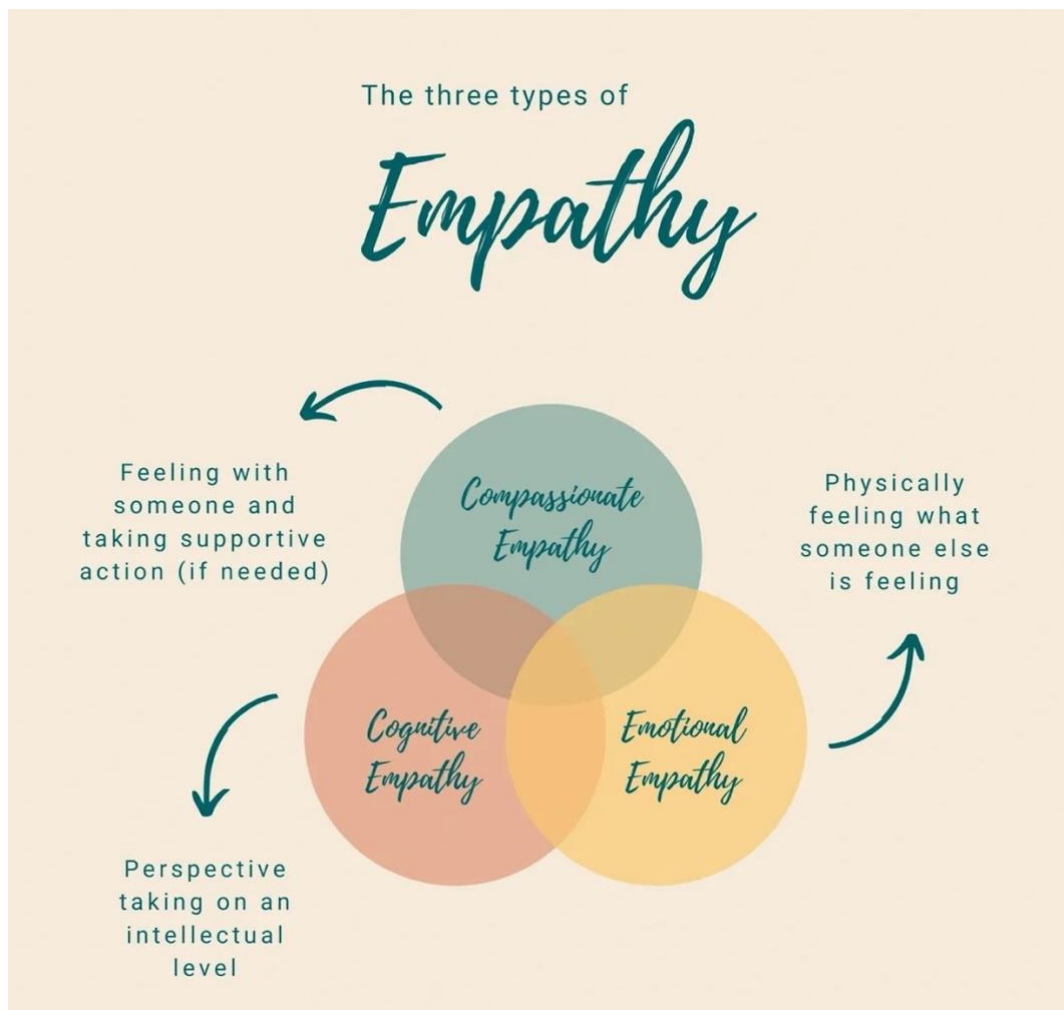

Figure 1. Three types of empathy (Adapted from Positive psychology in action, 2020).

3   Empathy, Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Leadership

Empathy is a complex and diverse concept, as we have discussed in previous chapters, its main features are related to understanding the feelings and emotions of other people. In this chapter we will look at the empathy from the Emotional Intelligence principles perspective since these two concepts are strongly connected and both focuses on understanding feeling and emotions.

The history of the nowadays well-known term "emotional intelligence" begins in a doctoral dissertation by Wayne Payne in 1985 and then was followed by two psychologists P. Salovey and J. Mayer in their 1990 article titled "Emotional Intelligence". (Malone, 2021, chapter 1). They define the term as the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as promote emotional and intellectual growth. In 1995 Daniel Goleman published his book "Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ" and the concept of EI became a well-known and popular term. In his book Goleman talks about five basic domains or components of EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills. (Jacobson, 2021, chapter 1).

Pallapa (2021) defines emotional intelligence or emotional quotient as the ability to understand and manage one's emotions and be sensitive to people's emotions around oneself. G. Hasson in his book "Understanding Emotional Intelligence" points out two key principles of EI. First, emotional intelligence is about being aware of emotions – identify and understand emotions – both your own and other people's emotions. Second, EI is about using and managing emotions, your own and others. Hence, the whole concept of Emotional Intelligence is a dynamic process, and each component or ability are connected and influencing the other (Figure 2). (Hasson, 2015).
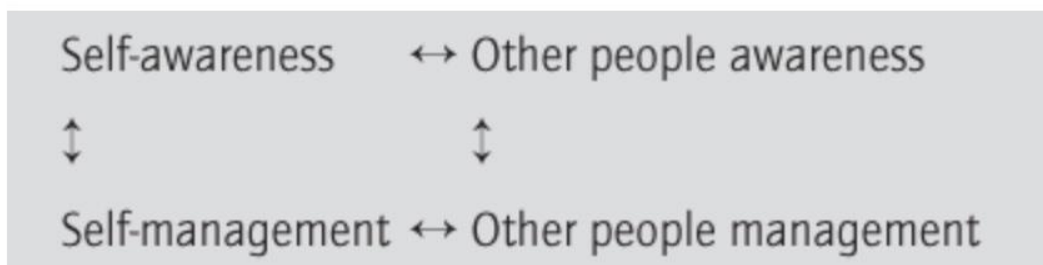

Figure 2. Concept of EI as a dynamic process (Adapted from Hasson, 2015)

Thus, from the perspective of the EI concept, empathy means feeling what others feel, to sense and respond to emotions of others. People who we call empathetic are attuned to the signals that

others send, whether they be verbal or nonverbal. They are able, via sensitive and deliberate actions, to reach out, support, and bond through shared emotions. (Malone, 2021).

Emotional Intelligence and empathetic leadership

Although some of researchers disagree with the claim that high EI is a strong predictor of organizational success, research does support the notion that EI plays a role in the way an individual performs in organizational setting (Mayer, 2008; Salovey, Caruso, Mayer 2004). One of a such connection links EI to a transformational leadership style (Gardner, Stough, 2002; Palmer, Walls, Burgess, Stough 2001; Sivanathan, Fekken, 2002; Wang, Huang, 2009).

Transformational leadership nowadays is superior in a modern business climate, and it is about the ability to change (i.e., transform) employees and the organization through communication. First Bass (1997) described the term when he differentiates between two leadership styles – transactional and transformational, where *transactional leadership* described as a style that focuses on meeting immediate needs as quickly and effectively as possible and the style itself as a natural result of bureaucratic systems. To illustrate this leadership style, the researcher gives three main characteristics of transactional leader:
1. to develop clear and specific objectives,
2. to exchange rewards and promises of rewards for employee efforts,
3. to be responsive to the self-interests of workers, particularly if the workers' needs can be met while also getting the job done. (Dainton, Zelley, 2015).

The transactional leadership style offers limited possibilities for demonstrating empathy or utilizing emotional intelligence, as evidenced by the approach's structure. Although, any given leader can be both transactional and transformative, research has consistently shown, that transformational leadership is associated with greater individual and organizational outcomes (Bass. 1998). In contrast transactional leadership seeks to achieve reliable and stable functioning, transformational leadership seeks to inspire exceptional performance (Bryant, 2003). At the center of transformational leadership is the ability to use employees' ideas and actions as a catalyst for transformation – moving ideas and actions towards the greater good of the organization. (Dainton, Zelley, 2015).

Bass (1985) identified four facets of *transformational leadership*:

Table 1. Facets of transformational leadership (Adapted from Dainton, Zelley, 2015)

Idealized influence	Transformational leaders serve as role models for employees. It involves trust, pride, and respect among all members of organization.
Inspirational motivation	Leaders present employees with a clear vision and desirable future. Employees' self-interest is subsumed to the interest of the greater good.
Intellectual simulation	The status quo is not taken for granted. Leaders challenge their own assumptions and encourage new approaches. Opinions are addressed openly and without fear, acknowledgement of our own mistakes and recognition of the superior ideas of others.
Individualized consideration	Leaders consider everyones' needs and abilities, while supporting development and mentoring efforts. Effectiveness is preferred to efficiency, and equity is preferred to equal exchange.

According to Lam and O'Higgins (2012), the connection between transformational leadership and EI lies in the accurate prediction of the successful application of transformational leadership, which in turn predicts employee satisfaction. Individuals who are able to recognize, manage, and use their own and others' emotions strategically have the ability to succeed in the workplace. (Dainton, Zelley, 2015).

Transformational leadership can also be seen as empathetic leadership. Pallapa (2021) describes this concept as the leadership that focuses on understanding the need of team members that increases psychological safety within the organization and makes everyone realize that they are important parts of the same team trying to accomplish the same purpose. Steed (2019) describing the empathetic leadership notes that what happens at the highest levels of a structure will eventually make its way through the organization to every department, team, and individual and that is why it is important for empathetic leaders to lead by example. Such leaders know that what they do will set the tone for the office. So, they encourage positive and productive interactions by approaching meetings, one-to-ones, and casual conversations with empathy in mind. (Steed, 2019).

4   Empathetic communication and communication theories

There is no one final definition of interpersonal communication. Different scientists and researchers define it from different perspectives. For example, some scholars define IPC based on the situation and number of participants involved (Miller, 1978), others based on the degree of "personalness", or perceiving quality of a given interaction (Peters, 1974). Another view of IPC is a goal approach, which means IPC includes communication used to define or achieve personal goals through interaction with others (Canary, Cody, Manusov, 2003). (Dainton, Zelley, 2015).

To define and understand what empathetic communication is, we will look at IPC from the perspectives of communication message, techniques, and goals of communication. Steed (2019), in her book "Empathy at work" argues that our general goal in communication is to get our message across and that is what leads us during any conversation we have.

We consider what we will say. We sometimes even make notes – mentally or written down – to make sure that what we are conveying aligns with our desired messaging. Then, we approach the person we want to converse with at a time and place that is most convenient and comfortable for us. Finally, when we speak, we tend to focus on how we feel during the moments we are speaking". (Steed, 2019).

Such communication when our goal is to be heard happens especially often when having work-focused conversations with coworkers. (Steed, 2019). As an opposite approach, Steed defines *empathetic communication* as a style or even as a paradigm of communication that prioritizes connection at the same level as messaging. While practicing empathetic communication individuals need to take into account the recipient, their state of mind, the situation that need to be addressed, and how to best communicate the message so that it's received as intended and delivered with empathy. (Steed, 2019).

To give this assumption more scope, let's look at it in the light of message design logic (MDL) communication theory. According to O'Keefe (1988, 1997), because people think about communication differently, they construct different types of messages, or in the other words people's views about the nature and function of communication affect their messages. (Dainton, Zelley, 2015, chapter 4). O'Keefe (1997) emphasized three types of design logic from which people operate: expressive, conventional, and rhetorical.

Expressive logic is a sender focused pattern (O'Keefe, 1988). Communication is viewed as a means of conveying the sender's thoughts and feelings. Communicators with expressive MDL pay very little attention to context and what may be appropriate behavior, they feel a genuine pressure to say what is on their minds right there and then. (Dainton, Zelley, 2015).

Conventional logic views communication as a rule-based game played cooperatively (O'Keefe, 1988). Individuals using such MDL view communication contexts, roles, and relationships as having particular guidelines for behavior (O'Keefe, 1977). They are concerned to do the "right" thing in any given situation. (Dainton, Zelley, 2015).

Rhetorical logic is when individuals view communication as a powerful tool used to create situations and negotiate multiple goals (O'Keefe, 1988). "Those acting on the basis of a rhetorical design logic focus on the effect of messages on the recipient". (Bonito, Wolski, 2002, p.256). This approach is noted for flexibility, sophistication, and depth of communication skills. Those using a rhetorical MDL pay close attention to other people's communication in an effort to figure out others' point of view. (Dainton, Zelley, 2015)

And although the above definitions of empathetical communication (Steed, 2019) and rhetorical type of MDL are not identical and are expressions of different phenomena in communication, it is still worth noting the similarity between them, such as focus on recipients and their state of minds. The MDL theory argues that none of these three strategies is superior to others (O'Keefe, 1977), and all communicators should recognize and accommodate diversity in MDL's (Dainton, Zelley, 2015, chapter 4). Indeed, from the point of view of the general diversity of communication styles, the existence of various ways of communication is important in human communication and can serve different goals and objectives. However, it is the third rhetorical type that is recognized as the most developed pattern (Dainton, Zelley, 2015, chapter 4), and as a highly flexible approach to communication in which speaker adapts to the situation, using self-expression or relying on social conventions as appropriate is the closest to the definition of empathetic communication.

The idea behind the use of empathetic communication speaks of the exceptional importance of using such a way of interacting with people, especially within organization, and calls this kind of communication not just a style but a communication paradigm. "Communication with empathy gives us a concrete foundation in even the most fluid of situations. It also lays the foundation for optimized collaboration" (Steed, 2019).

It is also important to consider that diverse types of messages are not the same as personal traits. Like EI, MDLs can change and develop over an individual life span. (Dainton, Zelley, 2015). The same can be said about empathy. Steed (2019), based on the research (Decety, 2010) argue that we are in control of the way we recognize and respond to other people's needs and feelings. The majority of the empathy we display and encounter in our lives is a result of learned behaviors. And if we can enact those learned behaviors on a personal level, we can engage in those same behaviors at work. (Steed, 2019).

Organizational culture and empathy

In order to better understand the importance of empathetic communication in an organization, we can examine the relationship between leadership, emotional intelligence, empathy, and organizational culture, as well as identify the essential attributes of an empathetic company. In their pursuit of success, leaders strive to establish an environment that maintains a certain level of achievement, recognizing that not everyone will always feel entirely comfortable or confident within the system (Steed, 2019). This is because complete stability within an organization is unattainable due to factors such as the onboarding of new hires, organizational changes, team members leaving, and individuals transitioning to new roles or teams. Such dynamics are inherent in the nature of business and work, underscoring the importance of understanding corporate culture.

Regarding organizational culture, there are two primary perspectives: one that perceives culture as something an organization possesses, and another that considers culture as something an organization embodies (Dainton, Zelley, 2015). This study will adopt the latter approach, emphasizing the communication process within an organization to determine and understand the characteristics of an empathetic company.

To illustrate this perspective let us start with the Schein model (Schein, 1992) which includes three levels of organizational culture: artifacts, values, and assumptions. According to Schein (1992), *artifacts* refer to the observable evidence of culture and may take the form of physical entities, such as architecture, dress, and documents, but they also consist of patterns of behavior (Dainton, Zelley, 2015). *Values* are defined as preferences about how a situation should be handled – shared beliefs about how things ought to happen. Organizational members can typically articulate them, and leaders are often the source of these values (Dainton, Zelley, 2015). The third level of culture, according to Schein (1992), is *assumptions* which refer to the viewpoints organizational members hold about the world, including perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Organizations develop assumptions about the nature of reality, time, space, human nature, and human relationships (Dainton, Zelley, 2015).

Barsade and O'Neill in their article in Harvard Business Review (2016) call these levels *cognitive* culture: the shared *intellectual* values, norms, artifacts, and assumptions that serve as a guide for a group to thrive. Cognitive culture sets the tone for how employees think and behave at work (Barsade, O'Neill, 2016). Cognitive culture is what the company deems important, how each employee treats one another, core values, and general company directives. (Steed, 2019). But, according to Barsade and O'Neill, it is only one side of the understanding of the corporate culture concept. The other important part is *emotional* culture: the shared *affective* values, norms, and

assumptions that govern which emotions people have and express at work and which ones they are better off suppressing. (Barsade, O'Neill, 2016).

The key distinction is thinking versus feeling and the difference in transmission between these two cultures. Cognitive culture is often conveyed verbally, whereas emotional culture tends to be conveyed through nonverbal cues such as body language and facial expression. (Barsade, O'Neill, 2016). Steed (2019) states that cognitive culture is what companies explicitly define as what is important to them and emotional culture is the actual experience people are having when they deal with the company. Based on that Steed (2019) defines corporate empathy as *the state of the emotional culture of a company and how it relates to the cognitive culture of the company*.

To be more specific, corporate empathy is the system which is based on core values of empathy:
1. Open lines of communication. Everyone feels that they can speak their mind, therefore everyone feels heard.
2. Everyone approaches situations with a baseline of respect. When we are speaking to others, we expect to be listened to and our opinion to be considered.
3. Full engaging in the culture by everyone. Every person in the company must engage in actions that create a culture of empathy.

Steed (2019) also noted that corporate empathy is at the intersection of what companies define as their culture (cognitive culture) and what that culture actually is at the company (emotional culture). If both of those types are aligned, corporate empathy is thriving. If not, something needs to be changed to make the environment better for every employee. (Steed, 2019).

5 Implementation of research method

Turning to the practical part of this research, we will focus on understanding the current level of empathy in company X, the level of satisfaction with communication processes, and general awareness of the concept of empathy among employees. The main purpose of the practical implementation is to gather insights into how employees see the current communication culture and how they perceive the concept of empathy. The acquired data will also help to create a further recommendation and to see how the principles of empathy could be implemented.

The chosen method for the research is a qualitative analysis which is implemented based on an internal communication survey. This questionnaire is anonymous and consists of multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions. The analysis of the received answers will be carried out with the support of theoretical sources and within the given above theoretical framework. The presence of a quantitative element, such as multiple-choice questions, is because with its help, for example, it is possible to measure the degree of satisfaction more accurately in the current level of communication. Some of the questions were obtained from another research about empathy (Smith, 2021), but all presented questions are carefully selected or created according to the goals of this research. The analysis of the answers will be divided by thematical sections such as the current level of communication satisfaction; perception of the empathy concept and evaluation of one's own and others' empathy; and suggestions for improvement from employees' perspective.

The survey has 12 questions in total: only two questions about background information mainly to preserve anonymity, two open-ended questions, and eight multiple-choice questions. The chosen platform for gathering the answers is a Webropol survey and the link for the survey was shared via an internal online communication channel. The number of respondents is 17, which is approximately 60% of the total number of employees currently working in the organization. The background analysis shows that 10 out of 17 respondents have been working at the company for no longer than 2 years, 5 no longer than 5 years, and 2 more than 5 years in the organization. 5 of the respondents show up at the office at least once a week, 7 people do it between 2 or 3 times per week, 4 are 4 or 5 times per week, and only one is working completely remotely.

Questions with an assessment of the degree of satisfaction or agreement with a statement have a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 means complete disagreement or dissatisfaction and 4 is complete agreement or satisfaction. The scale from 1 to 4 was chosen in order to obtain a more accurate assessment, since there is no middle option in this scale and the respondent must choose which pole of the answer he or she leans more towards.

5.1 Current level of communication satisfaction

There were four questions in the survey aimed at identifying the current level of satisfaction with communication. The questions were formulated on the basis of the definition of empathetic communication (chapter 4), where the main values are a sense of security, communication without fear of being judged, being heard, and receiving timely support and help, and ability to accept different type of personalities.

I feel it's safe for me to communicate with my colleagues without the fear of being judged – **3.4.**

- Condemnation is one of the biggest obstacles to building empathetic communication with colleagues (Brown, 2018). Nonjudgmental culture is linked to a feeling of psychological safety, and as many studies show communities with high psychological safety are more willing to take risks and innovate, they are not afraid to fail, and people are happier and embrace continuous learning and improvement. (Pallapa, 2021).
- The average 3.4 is closer to 4 and compared to results from other questions is the highest number, which means that most employees who responded to this survey are feeling safe to communicate and are not afraid of being judged by others. However, of course there is always room for improvement.

I feel like I'm heard and paid attention to. – **3.1**

- Being heard is one of the basic foundations of experiencing empathy and one of the habits of empathetic company. When everyone in the organization feels heard then it is possible to build empathetic communication and strong emotional culture.
- To increase the resulting number in the future, the recommendation is to practice active listening, which is a key component of empathetic communication. Listening fosters connection and encourages more honest communication because everyone feels included and valued. (Steed, 2019).

I get help and support when needed. – **3.3**

- If we look at the idea of support from an empathy perspective, it means understanding that everyone in the team needs something in somewhat different ways/degrees to feel supported and helped. It is incredibly important for all levels in the organization to know that they must approach every individual and situation for its own merit. (Steed, 2019).

It is challenging for me to communicate with someone who has a different mindset than me. – **1.5**

- In the second chapter, we discussed that one of the most challenging aspects of practicing cognitive empathy is showing empathy towards people who think differently from us. Developing this skill truly opens up broad horizons in managing a team.

- It is a positive finding that the average number is closer to the statement that it is not challenging for employees to communicate with different personalities.

5.2 Perception of the empathy concept and evaluation of one's own and others' empathy

As already mentioned in the second chapter, the meaning of the empathy concept has changed over time and people perceived it in a vastly different way in the past. Therefore, to be able to give an objective assessment of how employees evaluate their own level of empathy and empathy towards them in the organization, it was necessary to understand how they define the concept and whether everyone has a similar perception of empathy.

The open-ended question about the definition of empathy was formulated as *What does empathy means for you?* Employees were asked to give any description, example, or word in a free form. 15 respondents out of 17 wrote their answers and gave, on average, more than one feature or characteristic of empathy in each reply. The following table of receiving definitions is a summary of the answers and it shows the categorized frequency of the empathy definitions:

Table 2. The frequency of empathy definition

What does empathy mean for you?	*Frequency*
Mindfulness in choosing words to communicate	1
Ability to listen to without judging	3
Understanding other person's point of view	9
Active listening	4
Ability to feel or to share someone else's emotions	2
Understanding of reasoning, life situation or environment of another person	6
Realizing and understanding people's differences	1
Treating others with kindness and respect	2
Facilitation and collaboration	2

It is evident that there are numerous shared definitions among the responses, aligning closely with the definitions provided in Chapter 2 of this thesis. These definitions encompass aspects such as

comprehending another person's perspective, taking into account someone's life circumstances, and actively engaging in attentive listening. The findings indicate that the respondents possess a coherent understanding of the contemporary concept of empathy, with their perceptions of it being largely consistent with one another.

How empathetic do you think your communication towards others? – **2.9**

- Our own assessment of the empathy of our communication may not always coincide with how other people perceive it. To ensure that our communication is truly empathetic, it is important to pay attention to the reactions and feedback of other people to our communication. If we discover that other people are not responding to our communication as we expect, we can begin to look for ways to improve our communication to better meet the needs and expectations of others.

How empathetic do you think others perceive your work communication? – **2.7**

- Other people may perceive empathy as a demonstration of understanding, compassion, and care from another person. When we express empathy, we show that we understand the feelings, experiences, and needs of another person and are ready to support them in demanding situations. However, like any other form of communication, empathy can be perceived differently depending on who expresses it and to whom it is addressed. In addition, the perception of empathy may depend on cultural and social norms that vary in diverse cultures and groups of people. Thus, for empathy to be successful in communication, it is important to consider the individual needs and expectations of other people, as well as social and cultural norms.
- In her book, Brown (2018) says that if you ask a hundred people what another person should do in order to show empathy to them, you could get a hundred different answers. In this case, the only solution is to stay engaged in communication and be attentive. It's important to be flexible and open in your communication, taking into account the context and individual characteristics of each situation. Empathy is an individual experience for each person, and the more we strive to understand and respect other perspectives, the more effective our communication skills become.

Based on the responses, we can see that self-assessment of empathy does not match with employees' perception of how others see them. There could be several reasons why an individual's self-assessment of empathy does not match their colleagues' perception of them. For example:

- Different perspectives: The individual may have a perspective on what constitutes empathy that differs from the perspectives of their colleagues. This could lead to a mismatch between how the individual perceives their own empathy and how others perceive it.

- Bias: The individual may have biases that affect their self-assessment of empathy. For example, they may overestimate their empathy because they want to see themselves in a positive light, or they may underestimate it due to a lack of confidence.

- Communication style: The individual's communication style may not effectively convey their empathy to others, leading to a mismatch in perception. For example, they may be more reserved or introverted, which could lead others to perceive them as less empathetic than they are.

- Lack of feedback: The individual may not receive enough feedback from their colleagues on their level of empathy, which could lead to a mismatch in perception.

It is important to note that a mismatch in perception does not necessarily mean that one perspective is right, and the other is wrong. Instead, it may indicate that there are differences in how empathy is perceived and expressed, and that there is room for improvement in communication and feedback to better align perceptions.

One of the questions in the questionnaire is aimed at obtaining quantitative data on how employees perceive the communication culture. The question consists of 24 words or phrases that define the culture within the organization. Employees were asked to choose an unlimited number of answers, and in the end, each of the proposed words or phrases were chosen at least once. A total of 125 responses were received.

Table 3. Words or statements that describe the current communication culture in the company.

	n	Percent
Hierarchical	2	12.5%
Supportive	9	56.3%
Judgmental	2	12.5%
Motivating	6	37.5%
Stressful	3	18.8%
Negative	4	25.0%
Empathetic	3	18.8%
Forgiving	4	25.0%
Demotivating	5	31.3%
Not caring	3	18.8%
Understanding	8	50.0%
People are listened	6	37.5%

	n	Percent
Rude	3	18.8%
Team spirit	7	43.8%
Management-centric	2	12.5%
Positive	5	31.3%
Open	11	68.8%
Helpful	7	43.8%
Friendly	8	50.0%
Mistakes are ok	13	81.3%
Individualistic	2	12.5%
Ignoring	3	18.8%
Safe	8	50.0%
Unsafe or insecure	1	6.3%

An encouraging observation is that words and phrases associated with the definition of empathy and empathetic communication received the highest click rate. Terms such as "mistakes are ok," "open," "supportive," "friendly," "safe," and "understanding" garnered significant attention. While the exact word "empathetic" was selected only three times, other words and phrases directly related to fostering an open and supportive communication environment, which forms the foundation of empathetic communication, were prominently chosen.

In the second group of words formed based on the frequency of choice, positive ratings also prevail: "supportive," "helpful," "people are listened", "positive", etc. But in this group, there is also a definition that is worth paying attention to: "demotivating," that received 5 clicks. In a demotivating communication culture, communication is often one-way, with little opportunity for feedback or input from employees. Leaders may be dismissive of employee concerns, ideas, or suggestions, leading to feelings of frustration, disengagement, and a lack of commitment. One possible problem could be related to a lack of clarity around goals, expectations, and priorities, which can leave employees feeling uncertain and disempowered. This can lead to a lack of direction, focus, and motivation, as employees struggle to understand their role and the value of their contributions.

To address a demotivating communication culture, leaders must be willing to listen to employee feedback, and actively work to create a culture of open communication, where feedback is welcomed and used constructively. Leaders must also model positive communication behaviors, such as constructive feedback, active listening, and open dialogue, to encourage a culture of respect and collaboration. Moreover, leaders must be clear about organizational goals, priorities,

and expectations, and work to align employee goals and objectives with these larger goals. This can create a sense of purpose and direction, and help employees feel more engaged and motivated in their work.

The third and the last group includes mostly negative definitions of communication culture. A stressful, rude, and ignoring communication culture is a work environment where communication is negative, unproductive, and often disrespectful. It is a culture that can lead to elevated levels of stress, burnout, and employee turnover, as well as a negative impact on employee well-being, mental health, and job satisfaction. This also can lead to a culture of fear, where employees are hesitant to speak up or take risks, for fear of being punished or criticized. Employees may feel overwhelmed by the demands of their work, and unsupported by their managers or colleagues, leading to low morale and a lack of engagement.

To address a stressful, rude, and ignoring communication culture requires a commitment to open and honest communication, where feedback is given constructively and respectfully, and where employees feel heard and valued. Leaders must be willing to take responsibility for creating a culture of respect, empathy, and support. Leaders also must prioritize the mental health and well-being of their employees, by providing resources and support for stress management, and by promoting a healthy work-life balance. This can help to create a culture of trust and mutual respect, where employees feel valued, empowered, and supported in their work. Finally, leaders must model positive communication behaviors, such as active listening, empathy, and open dialogue, to foster a culture of respect and collaboration.

5.3 Suggestions for improvement from employees' perspective

The final question in the survey was *What could be done more or better to make you feel the communication culture is empathetic, supportive, and motivating?* 10 answers were received to this question, containing ideas and suggestions from the employees' point of view. These ideas and proposals will be listed below grouped thematically.

1. The first group of responses, which comprises just over a third of all the statements, is related to the image of the leader in the company. Employees believe that it is the leader who should set an example of what constructive communication and empathy should look like. Additionally, it is crucial for the leader to be consistent and to fulfill their own promises.

This image of a leader coincides with what was described in the third chapter of this thesis on transformational leadership. Where Bass (1985) describes this type of leaders as ones who serve as role models for employees, present employees with a sharp vision and desirable future,

challenge their own assumptions and encourage new approaches, and support development and mentoring efforts.

2. The second group of answers in terms of the number of mentions focuses on the quality and style of communication. Employees claim that communication that creates a more positive and empathetic experience is primarily open, transparent, and constructive communication, as well as practicing active listening.

The style of communication that is seen by employees as a positive communication experience matches with characteristics of empathetic communication and empathetic organizational culture that were discussed in the previous chapters of this research. Indeed, empathetic communication is an important aspect of building positive relationships and fostering trust, as it helps to create a safe and supportive environment for open and honest communication. It can also lead to better conflict resolution and problem-solving, as individuals are better able to understand each other's perspectives and needs.

Among the ideas not grouped together, as they were mentioned only once or twice, were the following suggestions:

- Clear organizational structure.
- Team building events and after work activities together.
- Guidelines/workshop on communication techniques.
- Practicing empathy on every level within an organization.
- Creating more efficient channels for communication.

These are valuable suggestions that should be taken into consideration. For example, a clear organizational structure is important because a well-defined organizational structure clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of each employee, which helps to avoid confusion, duplication of effort, and conflicts that can arise from unclear expectations. This helps to facilitate efficient communication by establishing clear lines of communication and identifying the appropriate channels for information to flow within the organization.

6   Conclusion

In conclusion, empathy is a crucial aspect of effective communication in all areas of life, including the workplace. Empathy helps individuals understand and connect with others, creating stronger relationships and improving collaboration and teamwork. It can also lead to better conflict resolution, increased job satisfaction, and overall better performance. Developing empathy is a continuous process that requires ongoing effort and practice. It involves being able to see situations from others' perspectives, understanding their emotions and needs, and responding in a supportive and compassionate manner. Employers and individuals alike can benefit from investing in training and resources that promote empathy and communication skills. In today's fast-paced, highly connected world, empathy is more important than ever before. By fostering a culture of empathy in the workplace, we can create healthier, more productive, and more fulfilling work environments that benefit everyone involved.

A workplace culture that values empathy can lead to more open and honest communication, better collaboration and teamwork, increased job satisfaction, and improved overall performance. To cultivate empathy in the workplace, it is important to promote a culture of open communication, encourage active listening, and provide opportunities for employees to develop their empathy skills through training and practice. It is also essential to ensure that the organizational structure supports and reinforces empathetic communication, by providing clear channels of communication, promoting collaboration, and encouraging employee feedback. Overall, the role of empathy in communication at the workplace is critical for building a healthy, productive, and positive work environment, where employees feel supported, valued, and empowered to succeed.

Implementing empathy in workplace communication is a long-term process that requires ongoing effort and commitment from both employers and employees. It involves developing a culture of empathy within the organization and providing training and resources to help employees improve their communication and people skills. Empathy is not a one-time solution, but rather a continuous process of learning and development. It requires consistent practice and a willingness to listen, understand, and respond to the needs and emotions of others. It also involves ongoing self-reflection and a commitment to personal growth.

Empathy in Action: Recommendations for Building a Culture of Understanding and Connection in the Focus Organization

The research identified two major problem areas that require attention and where the principles of empathy can be applied: communication style and leadership. Based on the theoretical sources

that were used in this study, as well as the author's observations and ideas, the following recommendations were created for the focus organization.

Suggestions or recommendations to promote empathetic communication in the workplace.

- *Practicing active listening*: Active listening is a key component of empathetic communication. In their book "Active Listening," published in 1957, psychologists C. Rogers and R. Farson contended that active listening can lead to emotional maturity in the people who are being listened to, as well as decreased authoritarianism (Steed, 2019).
- Empathetic communication is *agile communication*, which means approaching every interaction with an open mind and being ready to address our counterparts' reactions and concerns without any preconceived notions or biases.
- *Speaking with intention*: It is a vital component of empathic communication as it necessitates a focus on the purpose of the interaction. To achieve this, it is necessary to be measured and thoughtful in our responses. In situations where we may feel defensive, it is common to react negatively or hurtfully in response to the words spoken to us. However, it is crucial to consider the impact of our words on the other person, as reacting in a way that leads to further disagreement will not be productive. Speaking with intention involves keeping the desired result in mind and pushing past any challenges to achieve a positive outcome that maintains a healthy relationship (Steed, 2019).
- One effective way to demonstrate empathetic communication is to *refrain from making assumptions* about others. Instead, it is important to ask questions in order to gain a better understanding of their perspective and experiences.

The second thematic section of action points focuses on leaders of the company and provides suggestions on how to improve their leadership style by employing empathy principles. The aim is to create a positive experience among employees and enhance the emotional culture within the organization. Pallapa (2021) says that effective leadership plays a vital role in modeling desired behaviors for team members and providing guidance for overcoming challenges and achieving results. When managers and supervisors demonstrate a genuine willingness to assist their employees, foster a culture of idea sharing, and treat their team members with compassion, employees are likely to mirror these behaviors. Conversely, a failure to lead by example can create a sense of disconnect between leaders and team members, eroding trust and impeding progress toward shared goals. Without a sense of trust, leaders may struggle to engage their teams and achieve desired outcomes, undermining their effectiveness as leaders.

Recommended actions for leaders to incorporate empathy into the work environment.:

- Model empathetic behavior: To promote empathetic behavior, leaders can model it by engaging in active listening with employees, recognizing their emotions, and offering supportive and compassionate responses.

- Provide training and resources: To enhance employees' emotional intelligence and communication skills, leaders may offer training and resources, including workshops, coaching, and mentoring programs.

- Foster open communication: A conducive and supportive environment that promotes open communication should be created by leaders, where employees feel safe to express their thoughts, ideas, and concerns.

- Recognize and reward empathetic behavior: One suggestion for leaders is to acknowledge and incentivize empathetic behavior, such as highlighting instances of empathy in practice and integrating empathy into performance evaluations and feedback.

- Encourage self-reflection: Leaders ought to promote self-reflection and personal growth among employees by offering feedback and opportunities for introspection on their communication skills and behavior.

- Be consistent and committed: Consistency and commitment are essential for leaders in promoting empathy in the workplace. This includes setting clear expectations and holding themselves and others accountable for exhibiting empathetic behavior.

Creating a sense of psychological safety is another critical aspect of empathetic communication and fostering an environment in which individuals feel at ease expressing their opinions, ideas, and concerns without the fear of retribution or judgment. To increase psychological safety in the workplace, the following action points based on the book by Pallapa (2021) could be taken into consideration:

- Increase cooperation: create stable, balanced, and cross-functional teams that are built around value streams and a common purpose. These teams should have a representative from each functional area in the value stream and be empowered to create value, deliver it to production or to the customer, and manage the value.

- Celebrate failure: When fear is removed people start feeling safer and more comfortable sharing information. Embracing failure is one of the best things that can change the organization.

- Encourage experimentation: or even promote innovation. Give teams the freedom to explore new ideas and concepts that align with the value they create. Reward experiments that increase value.

- Promote fun: team building events encourage experimentation and the comfort of failure. (Pallapa, 2021).

Reflection on the research

Reflection on the research on the role of empathy has highlighted the significance of empathy in promoting effective communication and building positive relationships in the workplace. The findings of the research suggest that a lack of empathy can lead to demotivation, stress, and disengagement among employees. The research underscores the role of leaders in promoting a culture of empathy, through implementing actionable strategies such as active listening, open communication, and respect for diversity. Overall, the research emphasizes the importance of empathy in enhancing workplace communication and promoting a healthy and productive work environment.

Despite the contribution made by research to the topic of empathy, some limitations should also be noted. One limitation is the potential bias in self-report data, as people may overestimate their own level of empathy or hesitate to report their true feelings. Another limitation is the lack of longitudinal studies that could provide insight into the long-term effects of empathic interventions in this particular workplace. In addition, there may be cultural or contextual factors affecting the effectiveness of empathy strategies that were not taken into account in this study and require further study. Nevertheless, the empathy study provided valuable information about the importance of empathy in workplace communication and the potential benefits of implementing empathy strategies.

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Tables:

Table 1. Facets of transformational leadership (Adapted from Dainton, Zelley, 2015)

Table 2. The frequency of empathy definition

Table 3. Words or statements that describe the current communication culture in the company.

Figures:

Figure 1. Three types of empathy (Adapted from Positive psychology in action, 2020).URL: https://ppinaction.com/blog/f/empathy-and-inquiry-a-superfood-cocktail-for-your-relationships Accessed: 2.04.2023

Figure 2. Concept of EI as a dynamic process (Adapted from Hasson, 2015)

Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire

1. How long have you been working at the company?

○ 0-2 years
○ 2-5 years
○ More than 5 years

2. How often are you present at the office?

○ At least 1 time per week
○ 2-3 times per week
○ 4-5 times per week
○ I always work remotely

Evaluate on a scale from 1 to 4 how satisfied or agree are you with the statements. Where 1 means you don't agree and 4 means you strongly agree.

3. I feel it's safe for me to communicate with my colleagues without the fear of being judged.

| Not satisfied/Don't agree | 0 | | 4 | Satisfied/Agree | ☐ I don't know |

4. I feel like I'm heard and paid attention to.

0

| Not satisfied/Don't agree | 0 | | 4 | Satisfied/Agree | ☐ I don't know |

5. I get help and support when needed.

Not satisfied/Don't agree	0	Satisfied/Agree	☐ I don't know
	0 — 4		

6. It is challenging for me to communicate with someone who has a different mindset than me.

Don't agree	0	Agree	☐ I don't know
	0 — 4		

7. What empathy means to you?
(you can give any description, example, or word to define the concept)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. Practicing empathy is important for developing communication in the workplace.

Don't agree	Agree	☐ I don't know
0 — 4		

9. How empathetic do you think your communication towards others?

Not at all	0	Very empathetic	☐ I don't know
	0 — 4		

10. How empathetic do you think others perceive your work communication?

0

Not at all   Very   ☐ I don't

0   4   empathetic   know

11. Please select all words or statements that describe the current communication culture in the company (you can choose as many as you wish).

- ☐ Hierarchical
- ☐ Supportive
- ☐ Judgmental
- ☐ Motivating
- ☐ Stressful
- ☐ Negative
- ☐ Empathetic
- ☐ Forgiving
- ☐ Demotivating
- ☐ Not caring
- ☐ Understanding
- ☐ People are listened
- ☐ Rude
- ☐ Team spirit
- ☐ Management-centric
- ☐ Positive
- ☐ Open
- ☐ Helpful
- ☐ Friendly
- ☐ Mistakes are ok
- ☐ Individualistic
- ☐ Ignoring
- ☐ Safe
- ☐ Unsafe or insecure

12. What could be done more or better to make you feel the communication culture is empathetic, supportive, and motivating?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____