



# THE LENS LEADERSHIP

## First Reaction, A Survey Focused on the Connection Between Leadership & Empathy: The Results

I recently did a survey asking four questions about leadership. In fact, there was a purpose to this exercise. With intention, I lead with a question about leadership qualities, but what I was curious to find out was where the idea of **EMPATHY** fit in. On one day recently, I had been working with two very different clients: one is a highly intelligent Gen-Z woman in her first professional job out of college. The other, a smart as a whip Ivy-league, Wharton MBA-educated woman heading back into the workforce after raising three amazing girls. We had been talking about strengths, and each separately indicated something to the extent of, *'well, not a work thing, but my empathy strength...'* Not a work thing. Made me wonder what others felt. It certainly seems to me that in this time of uncertainty and doubt, EMPATHY just may be the most important leadership strength out there.

And so, this survey was born. A simple survey – four questions. I wasn't looking for analysis paralysis – just a **First Reaction** – the title I gave to the survey. There was no additional instruction other than the questions.

Here's what came out.

I should state that my goal was to make this as impartial as possible, and I wanted to get responses from a broad variety of perspectives. In this case, the survey was posted on [LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter](#), because I am very aware of the diverse audiences (backgrounds, affiliations, industries, and roles) I tend to have in each of these places.

**108 responses** came in within the timeframe of the survey. I left responses anonymous, though for the future I learned that I would have liked to know how males versus females responded, and perhaps age and geographical location.

In my overview, unless noted as an opinion, I attempt to be neutral. There are interesting things to notice, and I welcome you to draw your own conclusions.

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### **Question 1: Without hesitation, what are the 3 most critical qualities or characteristics of LEADERSHIP?**

I must say that I was surprised to see the responses. All 108 responders answered this question. 27% of responders used the word **EMPATHY**. Another 27% of responders used a word that is like EMPATHY, such as Compassion, Care, Listening, or Humility. And so, **50% of all responders to this open-ended and unprompted question said that one of the top 3 most critical qualities of leadership is something like EMPATHY.** Other top qualities mentioned were **INTEGRITY** with 20% of the vote, **VISION** with 19% of the vote, and **COMMUNICATION** with 16%. One person used a single word to describe their definition of leadership, and that was the word STRENGTH, and I will expand on this in the next question review. Here's a word cloud to show how the trends for this question:



A word cloud of leadership qualities. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'empathy' and 'integrity' being the largest. Other prominent words include 'vision', 'communication', 'compassion', 'honesty', 'listen', 'courage', 'trust', 'decisiveness', 'ability', 'humility', 'lead', 'intelligence', 'team', 'transparency', 'authenticity', 'caring', 'respect', 'focus', 'good', 'inspire', 'confidence', and 'decisions'.

Focus good Courage empowering Trust people decisiveness ability  
honesty respect listen Confidence Vision inspire  
empathy humility integrity lead  
communication Caring Compassion intelligence  
Authenticity decisions transparency ability communicate team

## Question 2: Short answer: Who is a leader in modern culture that truly inspires you and why?

What an inspiring group of leaders – and fortunate for me to be able to see the variety of responses and perspectives! Inspirational leaders came in from **politics, sports, music and entertainment, design, business, education, military/Veterans, non-profit, medicine, law, and there was even one fictional character** – who I had to look up to make sure I was reading it correctly. Yes, one person said their inspirational leader is Jean Luc Piccard, because he is *“really human & authentic, (a) listener, learner, decisive, worked hard to be empathetic”*.

The top response ran away with it: **Barack Obama**, who received 18% of the overall vote on this open-ended and unprompted question. In fact, the Obamas together received 26% of the vote. **Michelle Obama** received 8%.

The second highest vote-getter was **Volodymyr Zelensky**, with 9% of the total responses. Since the survey took place mostly at the end of February 2022 through the first week of March, it might be interesting to know how the responses on his behalf would increase if I asked the same question today, at the end of March 2022.

In third place was **Michelle Obama**, and in fourth place, **Sara Blakeley**, businesswoman and founder of Spanx. The fifth highest number of responses were for **Nelson Mandela**. I am aiming to stay as neutral as I can in this report, but I’ll ask this question to ponder:

*In an ideal world (since Nelson Mandela is no longer with us), what could be meaningful about a leadership team made of these 5 people of varying perspectives?*

Three leaders received 2 responses each, and it’s interesting because they come from unique backgrounds: **Condoleezza Rice, Jose Andres, and Elon Musk**.

I’d like to call attention to all the people who received votes. I looked up all of the names I didn’t recognize and learned about some really interesting leaders. I encourage you to do that as well:

Alan Mulally (businessman)  
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Angela Merkel  
Alison Conigliaro-Hubbard (leadership coach, writer, speaker)  
Bernie Sanders  
Bill Gates  
Bob Iger  
Brene Brown  
Bruce Springsteen  
Dany Garcia (businesswoman)  
Dave Grohl  
Debbie Millman (writer, artist, designer)  
Dolly Parton  
Donald Trump  
Dr Anthony Fauci  
Elizabeth Warren  
Gerry Brooks (author)  
Hillary Clinton  
Jean Luc Picard  
Jensen Huang (businessman)  
Joe Biden  
Justin Trudeau  
Kristi Noem (politician)  
Linda Oubre (education)  
Maria Eifel (businesswoman)  
Michael Dell  
MS Dhobi (professional cricketer)  
Nancy Duarte (writer, speaker, CEO)  
Nancy Pelosi  
Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (economist and global sustainability advocate)  
Nicole Malachowski (retired US Air Force officer and pilot)  
Oprah Winfrey  
Rafael Nadal  
Ruth Bader Ginsberg  
Satya Nadella  
Serena Williams  
Simon Sinek  
Simone Biles  
Stacy Abrams  
Steph Curry  
Tim Cook  
Tom Brady

Tom DeBlass (mixed martial artist)  
Tom Mendoza (businessman)  
Vala Afshar (writer and business leader)  
Vu Le (writer, speaker, and social justice leader)

There were **63 men** and **37 women** who received votes. It is interesting to also note that 8 responders answered, *"can't think of one", "don't have one",* or something similar. One person said, *"anyone who is told they can't find their way".* It's worth mentioning that that same person who answered 'strength' as their most valued leadership quality in question 1, also is the one person who responded to this question with Donald Trump.

It is difficult to sum up all of the reasons responders offered as the 'whys', but some of the words used included, *fierce desire, commitment, work ethic, grace, class, good judgment on and off the field of play, empathetic, brave, thoughtful, principled, down to earth, compassionate, appreciative, brilliant, inspiration...* there are so many great answers to WHY each person was selected. A few:

For **Sara Blakeley**, someone said, *"(she) created a solution to a real problem and never stopped. She leads with creativity, empathy, and a desire to create the best for everyone around her. She is 100% authentic even showing decisions that didn't work and that has served her well",* and another said, *"she built her company against the advice of many with a culture focused on people & creating innovative products. Money was never her focus, but she just sold her company for over a billion dollars."*

For **Satya Nadella**, CEO, Microsoft, someone said he inspires them *"because he has compassion and empathy for people as he leads a global innovative company."*

I'll use this as an opportunity to honor the one and only Taylor Hawkins. One person is inspired by **Dave Grohl**'s leadership, because *"he will try anything once and leave something he loves and is good at (drums) and give that roll to someone else as he challenges himself (guitar, lead performer)."* (Editorial: Taylor sure was great at giving life to his drums; this response was provided two weeks before Taylor Hawkins' untimely passing)

In another, someone is inspired by **Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala** because she is *"a brilliant mind and respects all humankind while embracing her own heritage."*

When responders included their 'why', the word empathy or empathetic was included 7 times. In other responses, words with similar meaning were also used to describe reasons why their leader of choice stood out.

I will add that while there are so many people who inspire me, my answer was **Bob Iger**, former Chairman and CEO of Disney, who inspires me tremendously as a risk-taker, a visionary who has executed on his vision in a wide variety of ways, a relationship and partnership-builder and an empathetic leader. There isn't a book I have read in recent years that has inspired me as much as Iger's *Ride of a Lifetime* when it comes to vision in business and partnership.

Humbly, thank you to whoever entered my name as your response.

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### **Question 3: No hesitation: What is the first word or phrase that comes to mind when you hear the word: EMPATHY**

You might notice that this is the first question where I (the survey writer) use the word EMPATHY. I did this on purpose so as not to lead with my intent. What I really wanted to get a sense for is where EMPATHY fit into a general societal view of leadership, especially given the experience that prompted the survey in the first place. Of course, this is just one cut of 108 people, but without knowing who answered, it's clear that responders come from a variety of backgrounds, each with a unique lens on the world.

The top 5 responses to this open-ended question had 22% of responders using the word **UNDERSTANDING**, 20% said empathy meant **CARING**, 6.5% of responders said **CONNECTION** or **COMPASSION**, and 6% said **RELATABLE**. Only 1 person used the word **WEAK** to describe empathy. I will note this is the same person who responded 'strength' to question 1, and '(Donald) Trump' to question 2. I choose to point this out since this person seems to have a unique perspective in contrast to all other responses. Again, I have no knowledge of who submitted responses, and I invite you to draw your own conclusions.

Here is the word cloud for this question, noting most used responses.

someone s people shoes Kindness Connection everyone Feeling relate  
Caring trying Understanding quality others  
listening Compassion heart another emotions

A few interesting phrases were used to describe empathy: A few examples:

*"The ability to see through the eyes of another"*

*"Overused word, critical characteristic of a leader"*

*"Listening for understanding with an open heart and empty mind"*

*"Imagine walking a mile in their shoes"*

*"To identify with what another person, or animal is experiencing"*

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**Question 4: Complete this sentence. Someone who is naturally empathetic, could be a great...**

I was curious to know how people would respond. I thought, IF it were the case where an abundant number of responders to this survey do NOT view empathy as an important leadership quality, then what profession or role is perceived to make the most sense for people who have this natural way about their character? Since we now know from the previous question responses that many DO connect empathy to leadership, let's look more closely.

In fact, **LEADER was the number 1 answer to this question**, and it wasn't even close. 49% of responders – 53 people – used the word LEADER in response to this question.

Other top responses were **LISTENER, FRIEND, COACH, TEACHER, MENTOR, MOTIVATOR, PRESIDENT** – each receiving more than 2 responses, but less than 10.

Clearly 'leader' is not a specific job, but leadership qualities are valuable 'responders, in their answers portrayed in question 1 and 4, felt strongly that EMPATHY is a critical quality of a LEADER.

Mentor counselor parent Nurse friend person Leader therapist  
Listener healer Coach Teacher


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### So, what did we learn?

This short survey was intended to get a ‘first reaction’ to investigate the qualities we look for and connect with in leaders. [My hidden agenda was to better understand how the characteristic of empathy showed up in the context of leadership.](#) Do I think this is the whole story? No – it’s a data set and a cut, based on asking for input from a broad group with varying backgrounds.

What we see is that in most cases, the idea of empathy is sought after as a critical quality for leaders in the world, no matter where we lead – at home, in the workplace, and across any industry.

[And while we might intellectualize the great idea of empathy, what is it really, and what makes it so important in leadership?](#)

 **em·pa·thy**  
/'empəTHē/  
*noun*  
the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

**Similar:** affinity with rapport with sympathy with understanding of  
sensitivity toward sensibility to identification with awareness of fellowship with  
fellow feeling for like-mindedness **togetherness** closeness to chemistry

**Opposite:** distance ^

### The ability to understand and share the feelings of others.

I’ll close with a few questions worth pondering. From the responses above, most people feel that empathy gives people a sense of being heard, valued.



How would it look to practice this approach to leadership? What would it be like to pause on judgment and connect from a place of curiosity and wonder about someone else... or even a whole group of someone elses? What value can come from trying on someone else's lens on the world?

How can taking an empathetic approach impact our teams, employees, partners, clients, customers, friends, family members, neighbors, communities, fellow citizens, countries? How can it impact outcomes?