



RESEARCH ARTICLE

When Leaders Understand: The Influence of Empathetic Leadership on Employee Engagement, Psychological Safety and Performance

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ABSTRACT

Empathetic leadership has attracted growing attention as organizations explore leadership approaches that strengthen employee relationships, motivation, and performance. However, the mechanisms through which leader empathy translates into workplace outcomes remain insufficiently integrated. This conceptual paper develops a framework that explains the influence of empathetic leadership on employee psychological safety, engagement, and performance. Drawing on social exchange theory and job demands-resources theory, the paper synthesizes contemporary and foundational literature across leadership, organizational behavior, and workplace psychology. Four propositions are developed. The framework proposes that empathetic leadership enhances psychological safety of employees by reducing perceived interpersonal risk and communicating concern, understanding and support. It further argues that empathetic leadership strengthens employee engagement when employees feel safe psychologically. Greater engagement is subsequently expected to contribute to improved employee performance. The resulting sequential pathway is conceptualized as empathetic leadership → psychological safety → employee engagement → employee performance. The paper contributes to the leadership literature by integrating previously fragmented streams of research and identifying psychological safety and employee engagement as key mechanisms linking leader empathy with performance. It also highlights practical implications for leadership development while recognizing that empathy requires appropriate boundaries and should not be equated with reduced accountability. Future empirical research is needed to test the proposed relationships across organizational contexts.

Keywords: Empathetic leadership, Psychological safety, Employee engagement, Work engagement, Employee performance, Social exchange theory, Job demands-resources theory

1. Introduction and background

Organizations are now operating in environments that are gradually being marked by uncertainty, interdependence, technological change, and shifting employee expectations. These conditions have strengthened interest in leadership approaches that extend beyond transactional coordination to the quality of relationships between leaders and employees. One such approach is empathetic leadership, which emphasizes a leader's capacity to recognize, understand, and respond appropriately to employees' perspectives, emotions, and work-related concerns (Kock et al., 2019; Muss et al., 2026; Zivkovic, 2022). Kock et al. (2019) conceptualize empathetic leadership around the communication of emotional support and understanding. Their work suggests that such leadership can influence follower attitudes and performance. More recent research also positions empathy as a growing+ relevant relational capability in contemporary leadership practice (Crane, 2025; Muss et al., 2026; Yusoff, 2026).

Empathy in leadership is important because employees do not experience leadership only through formal decisions or performance expectations. They also interpret their leaders' ability to listen to them,

understand their circumstances, and respond to their needs with concern and respect (Crane, 2025; Muss et al., 2026). These relational signals shape how employees evaluate both their leaders and the broader work environment. Empathetic leadership may therefore function as a social resource that strengthens interpersonal relationships, reduces perceived threat, and encourages employees to contribute more at work. Empirical evidence has linked empathetic leadership with outcomes including job satisfaction, innovation, proactive behavior, and performance (Bani-Melhem et al., 2021; Kock et al., 2019). Recent evidence also indicates that leader empathy is positively associated with employees' psychological safety (Du & Xie, 2025).

Psychological safety is particularly relevant to understanding why empathy may matter. It reflects a work environment in which individuals experience reduced interpersonal risk when speaking up, asking questions, admitting mistakes, or offering new ideas. Research has established leadership as an important influence on psychological safety. Psychologically safe environments have also been associated with learning, collaboration, voice, and performance (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Frazier et al., 2017). When employees believe that leaders understand their concerns rather than dismissing them, they may be more willing to express themselves and participate actively. Research in related leadership domains supports this reasoning. For example, psychological safety has been shown to mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and work engagement (Siyal, 2023).

Employee engagement provides another important mechanism through which empathetic leadership may influence performance. For conceptual precision, this paper approaches employee engagement primarily through the established work engagement tradition. Work engagement refers to a positive motivational state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Bakker et al., 2023; Hakanen & Keltainen, 2026). Engaged employees invest substantial cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy in their work. This is important for organizations because engagement is consistently associated with job performance. Corbeanu & Iliescu (2023) meta-analysis found a positive overall relationship between work engagement and job performance across 166 independent samples.

Despite these advances, the relevant literature remains fragmented. Studies on empathetic leadership have examined outcomes such as satisfaction, innovation, performance, and proactive behavior. Meanwhile, psychological safety and engagement are frequently examined within closely related leadership traditions, such as inclusive, servant, and transformational leadership (Bani-Melhem et al., 2021; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Siyal, 2023). Consequently, less attention has been devoted to an integrated explanation of how empathetic leadership may simultaneously shape psychological safety, employee engagement, and subsequent performance. This fragmentation limits understanding of the mechanisms through which leaders' empathetic behaviors may translate into meaningful workplace outcomes.

This paper addresses this gap by integrating empathetic leadership, psychological safety, employee engagement, and employee performance within a unified framework. It proposes that empathetic leadership contributes to employee performance through psychologically safe conditions and stronger employee engagement. By connecting relational, psychological, and motivational processes, the paper seeks to clarify how leaders' understanding and support of employees can be translated into stronger individual and organizational outcomes.

2. Literature review and proposition development (Conceptual foundations)

2.1 Empathetic leadership as a relational leadership capability

Empathy is generally understood as a multidimensional capacity involving cognitive understanding of another person's perspective, affective sensitivity to another person's emotional state, and behavioral

communication of that understanding. In leadership settings, these dimensions become significant because employees evaluate not only what leaders decide but also whether leaders recognize their experiences and respond appropriately. Kock et al. (2019) conceptualize empathetic leadership as a process through which leaders communicate understanding and emotional support to followers. A recent systematic review by Muss et al. (2026) reinforces this multidimensional view. Their synthesis shows that the effects attributed to empathetic leaders span affect, attitudes, interpersonal relationships, performance, and well-being.

Empathetic leadership is therefore more specific than general interpersonal warmth. It involves perspective-taking, attention to employee cues, emotional understanding, and supportive responses that communicate respect and value. It is also different from other related constructs. For example emotional intelligence concerns a broader set of capabilities associated with perceiving, understanding, and regulating emotions. Inclusive leadership emphasizes openness, accessibility, and participation. Empathetic leadership places greater emphasis on accurately appreciating employees' perspectives and emotional experiences and communicating that understanding through leader behavior. Although these constructs can overlap, treating empathy as a distinct relational mechanism allows clearer examination of how employees interpret leader behavior (Kock et al., 2019; Muss et al., 2026).

Empathetic leadership has been associated with positive attitudes, innovation, proactive behavior, well-being, and performance (Kock et al., 2019; Muss et al., 2026). However, sustained empathic demands may place significant emotional burden on leaders. This may create strain when adequate resources and boundaries are absent (Yusoff, 2026). The present framework therefore does not equate empathy with permissiveness or the lowering of performance expectations. Instead, it views empathy as a relational capability through which leaders can understand employees while maintaining organizational goals and standards.

2.2 Theoretical grounding: social exchange and job demands-resources perspectives

Two theoretical perspectives provide the foundation for the proposed relationships. Social exchange theory proposes that workplace relationships develop through reciprocal exchanges of valued resources and favorable treatment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When employees perceive that leaders listen to their concerns, understand their circumstances, and demonstrate genuine support, they may interpret such behavior as a relational investment. Employees may respond through stronger attachment, cooperation, and constructive work behavior. Research on organizational support similarly indicates that employees respond favorably when they believe that their contributions are valued and their well-being is taken seriously (Eisenberger et al., 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017).

Job demands-resources (JD-R) theory complements this exchange perspective. The theory proposes that job resources help employees meet work demands, achieve goals, preserve energy, and maintain motivation (Bakker et al., 2023). Leadership can constitute an important social resource within this process. Empathetic leaders provide socioemotional resources through listening, recognition, reassurance, and context-sensitive support. Such resources can reduce relational strain while making it easier for employees to seek assistance, discuss difficulties, and remain motivated. Empathy may therefore affect performance not merely because employees prefer empathetic leaders, but because leader behavior changes the social and psychological resources available to employees.

Social exchange theory and JD-R theory provide complementary explanations. Social exchange theory explains why employees may reciprocate supportive treatment, while JD-R theory explains how supportive leadership provides resources that sustain motivation. Psychological safety and employee engagement consequently represent plausible mechanisms through which empathetic leadership can influence performance.

2.3 Empathetic leadership and psychological safety

Psychological safety refers to a work environment in which individuals perceive reduced interpersonal risk when expressing concerns, asking questions, acknowledging mistakes, or contributing alternative viewpoints. It does not imply freedom from accountability. Rather, it reflects confidence that appropriate interpersonal risk-taking will not lead to humiliation, rejection, or unnecessary punishment. Leadership has consistently been identified as an important antecedent because leaders strongly influence how employees expect such interpersonal risks to be received (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Frazier et al., 2017).

Empathetic leadership fosters psychological safety through several mechanisms. Perspective-taking helps leaders understand why employees may hesitate to raise concerns. Emotional sensitivity can reduce dismissive or unnecessarily punitive reactions. Supportive communication signals that employee viewpoints are worthy of consideration even when the leader does not ultimately agree. These behaviors reduce uncertainty concerning the interpersonal consequences of speaking openly. Evidence supports this reasoning. Bani-Melhem et al. (2021) found that empathetic leadership buffered conditions that could undermine frontline employees' psychological safety. More recently, (Du & Xie, 2025) found a positive relationship between leader empathy and employees' psychological safety within their model of leader mindfulness in communication. The following is therefore proposed:

Proposition 1: *Empathetic leadership is positively associated with employee psychological safety.*

2.4 Empathetic leadership and employee engagement

This paper adopts *work engagement* as its principal conceptualization of employee engagement. Work engagement represents a positive affective-motivational state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Hakanen & Keltainen, 2026). Engaged employees invest substantial energy and attention in their work and tend to persist when demands arise. Engagement is shaped by both job characteristics and social resources. Leadership is therefore an important part of the motivational context in which engagement develops (Bakker et al., 2023; Hakanen & Keltainen, 2026). Empathetic leadership may strengthen employee engagement through reciprocity and resource provision. Employees who feel heard, understood, and valued are more likely to view their relationship with the leader positively. In social exchange terms, they may reciprocate this favorable treatment through stronger psychological investment and discretionary effort. Empathy can also help leaders identify barriers to performance and provide support that reflects employees' actual circumstances. These actions can preserve motivational resources that might otherwise be consumed by interpersonal conflict, uncertainty, or perceived neglect. Recent evidence strengthens this argument. Durman et al. (2026) found that empathetic leadership significantly enhanced employee engagement among Generation Z employees in Indonesia and India. Their results also show that job crafting functioned as a motivational mechanism linking leadership with engagement. Other emerging studies similarly associate empathetic leadership with employee voice, constructive attitudes, and engagement-related outcomes, suggesting that employees are more willing to invest themselves in work when leader behavior communicates understanding and support (Khan et al., 2026; Yusoff, 2026). The following is therefore proposed:

Proposition 2: *Empathetic leadership is positively associated with employee engagement.*

2.5 Psychological safety and employee engagement

Psychological safety is also likely to serve as a mechanism connecting empathetic leadership with engagement. Engagement requires employees to invest cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy in their roles. Such investment becomes more difficult when individuals devote significant attention to self-protection, impression management, or fear of negative interpersonal consequences. In psychologically safe environments, employees can allocate greater attention to learning, collaboration,

experimentation, and task involvement (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Frazier et al., 2017). Research involving related relational leadership approaches supports this mechanism. Siyal (2023) found that psychological safety mediated the relationship between inclusive leadership and work engagement. Although inclusive leadership and empathetic leadership are distinct constructs, both communicate interpersonal acceptance and leader availability. Empathetic leadership may offer an additional mechanism because it focuses directly on understanding employees' subjective experiences. Employees who believe that leaders will try to understand their circumstances surrounding a mistake, concern, or dissenting opinion should be less inclined to remain silent or psychologically withdrawn. Psychological safety can therefore be viewed not only as an outcome of empathy but also as a condition that facilitates deeper employee involvement. The following is therefore proposed:

Proposition 3: *Psychological safety is positively associated with employee engagement and positively influences the empathetic leadership-employee engagement link.*

2.6 Employee engagement and employee performance

Employee performance represents the outcome variable in the proposed framework. Work engagement is consistently associated with performance because engaged employees tend to demonstrate greater energy, persistence, concentration, and willingness to invest effort in their roles. Corbeanu & Iliescu (2023) meta-analysis of 166 independent samples found a positive relationship between work engagement and job performance, including task and contextual performance. Contemporary engagement literature also identifies performance as an important consequence of sustained work engagement (Hakanen & Keltainen, 2026).

Empathetic leadership may therefore influence performance through a motivational pathway rather than only through a direct leader-to-performance relationship. Kock et al. (2019) provided initial evidence that empathetic leadership can influence follower performance through favorable affective and behavioral processes. The framework in this study extends this reasoning by positioning psychological safety and employee engagement as sequential mechanisms. Empathetic leadership communicates understanding and support. These signals reduce perceived interpersonal risk. Greater psychological safety then allows employees to participate more fully, while engagement converts this willingness into sustained motivational investment. This process is consistent with JD-R theory because social and psychological resources can stimulate motivational processes that facilitate positive work outcomes (Bakker et al., 2023; Kock et al., 2019). The following is therefore proposed:

Proposition 4: *Employee engagement is positively related to employee performance.*

These four propositions position empathetic leadership as the relational starting point of the conceptual model rather than as an isolated leader characteristic. The framework explains how understanding employees can translate into performance through two interconnected conditions. Employees must first feel sufficiently safe to participate openly and then sufficiently motivated to invest sustained energy in their work. The resulting sequence is shown in Figure 1. This integrated framework preserves the conceptual distinctions among the constructs while explaining how they may operate together.

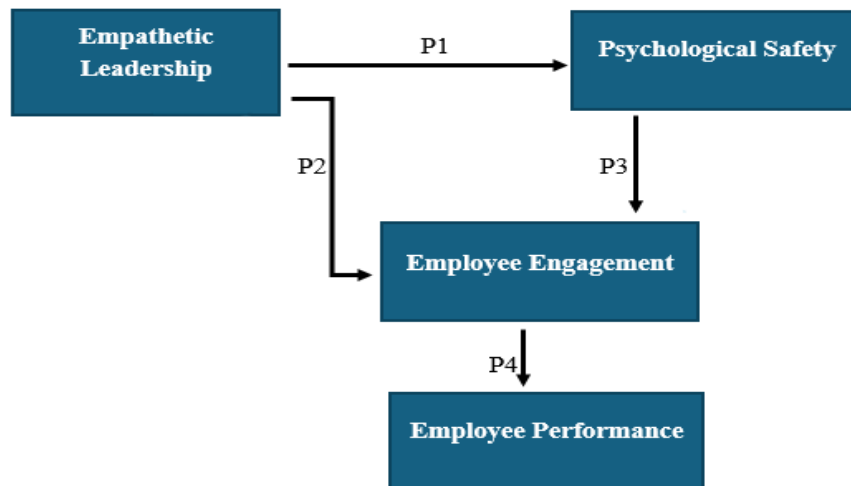


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Empathic leader-Performance sequential relationship

3. Methodological approach

This study adopts a *conceptual theory-synthesis* approach supported by an integrative review of relevant literature. Conceptual research is appropriate when the objective is to connect previously separate theoretical perspectives, clarify relationships among constructs, and develop explanations that extend existing knowledge rather than test hypotheses using new empirical data (Jaakkola, 2020). Accordingly, the purpose of this study is not to conduct a systematic review or meta-analysis. Instead, it integrates research on empathetic leadership, psychological safety, employee engagement, and employee performance to develop a coherent explanatory framework. This approach is consistent with the view that literature-based inquiry can generate theoretical knowledge by synthesizing and conceptualizing existing research (Kunisch et al., 2023; Snyder, 2019).

The literature search was organized around the central constructs and theoretical relationships identified in the research problem. Relevant literature was sought using combinations of terms including “*empathetic leadership*”, “*leader empathy*”, “*empathy at work*”, “*psychological safety*”, “*employee engagement*”, “*work engagement*”, “*employee performance*”, “*job performance*”, “*social exchange theory*”, and “*job demands-resources theory*”. Priority was given to peer-reviewed articles in leadership, organizational behavior, human resource management, and organizational psychology. Recent studies were emphasized to reflect contemporary literature, while seminal studies were retained where necessary to establish the theoretical foundations of the constructs. Conceptual articles, empirical studies, meta-analyses, and high quality review articles were considered because integrating different forms of evidence can strengthen theory development in conceptual research (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016).

Source selection was guided primarily by theoretical relevance rather than exhaustive coverage. Studies were retained when they contributed directly to defining the focal constructs, explaining relationships among them, or supporting the theoretical mechanisms underlying the proposed framework. Literature addressing empathy outside workplace or leadership settings without a meaningful organizational connection was excluded. This purposive and iterative approach is consistent with theory synthesis research, in which concepts and theories are selected for their capacity to address fragmentation and

generate a more integrated explanation of a phenomenon (Jaakkola, 2020). Table 1 shows the key selected studies that informed the proposed framework developed for this study.

Table 1: *Key selected literature informing the conceptual framework*

Author(s) Year	Contribution to the literature	Significance to the present study
Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005)	Synthesized social exchange theory and reciprocity in organizational relationships.	Provides the theoretical basis for explaining why employees may reciprocate empathetic and supportive leadership with positive work behaviors.
Kock et al. (2019)	Developed and initially tested a theory of empathetic leadership linking leader understanding and emotional support with follower outcomes and performance.	Provides the principal conceptual foundation for empathetic leadership and its proposed relationship with employee performance.
Frazier et al. (2017)	Meta-analytically examined antecedents and outcomes of psychological safety across individual and group levels.	Establishes psychological safety as an important workplace mechanism connecting interpersonal conditions with employee behaviors and performance.
Bani-Melhem et al. (2021)	Examined empathetic leadership, psychological safety, and proactive employee behavior among frontline employees.	Provides direct empirical support for connecting empathetic leadership with psychological safety and constructive employee behavior.
Decuyper & Schaufeli (2021)	Meta-analyzed positive leadership styles and work engagement and identified common explanatory mechanisms.	Supports the proposition that supportive relational leadership can contribute to stronger employee engagement.
Bakker et al. (2023)	Updated job demands-resources theory and explained how job and social resources contribute to motivation and work engagement.	Provides the resource-based theoretical explanation for how empathetic leadership can strengthen engagement.
Edmondson & Bransby (2023)	Synthesized contemporary research on psychological safety, its antecedents, processes, and organizational consequences.	Supports psychological safety as the key psychological mechanism between empathetic leadership and employee engagement.

Author(s) Year	Contribution to the literature	Significance to the present study
Mazzetti et al. (2023)	Meta-analyzed work engagement within the JD-R framework, including the roles of social, job, developmental, and personal resources.	Strengthens the argument that supportive workplace resources facilitate employee engagement.
Corbeanu & Iliescu (2023)	Meta-analyzed the relationship between work engagement and task and contextual performance.	Provides strong empirical support for the proposed engagement-performance relationship.
Muss et al. (2026)	Synthesized research on the effects of empathetic leaders across multiple organizational outcomes.	Establishes the contemporary evidence base for empathetic leadership and highlights the fragmentation that the present integrated framework addresses.

The selected literature was synthesized conceptually rather than statistically. Findings across the four research streams were compared to identify recurring relationships and plausible explanatory mechanisms. Social exchange theory and job demands-resources theory were then used to connect the relationships. This process resulted in the four propositions developed in Section 2 and the integrated pathway linking *empathetic leadership* to *psychological safety*, *employee engagement*, and *employee performance*. The approach therefore moves beyond summarizing prior studies toward explaining how previously dispersed findings can be connected within a unified conceptual model.

4. Findings and discussion

The conceptual synthesis reveals a consistent pattern across the literature. Empathetic leadership appears to influence employee outcomes through interconnected relational, psychological, and motivational processes. The evidence reviewed supports the proposed sequence in which empathetic leadership strengthens psychological safety, psychological safety encourages engagement, and engagement contributes to employee performance. However, the strength of evidence is not uniform across all relationships. Dimpirical research on empathetic leadership remains less developed than research on psychological safety and work engagement. This distinction is important when interpreting the four propositions.

4.1 Empathetic leadership as the relational starting point

The first major finding is that empathy can be understood as a leadership resource that shapes employees' interpretation of their relationship with the leader. Kock et al. (2019) demonstrated that leaders' communication of emotional support and understanding can influence follower attitudes and performance. More broadly, Muss et al. (2026) systematically reviewed 42 studies and identified effects of empathetic leadership across areas including affect, attitudes, interpersonal relationships, performance, and well-being. The predominance of positive outcomes across these categories provides support for positioning empathetic leadership as the starting point of the proposed framework.

This finding also extends the interpretation of empathy beyond being a desirable interpersonal quality. From a social exchange perspective, empathetic behavior communicates that employees are valued and that their experiences matter. Employees may consequently reciprocate through cooperation,

commitment, and greater investment in their work. From a JD-R perspective, supportive leadership represents a social resource that can help employees manage demands while maintaining motivation. Job resources are strongly associated with work engagement, while social resources also show meaningful positive relationships with engagement (Bakker et al., 2023; Mazzetti et al., 2023).

4.2 Psychological safety as a central explanatory mechanism

The synthesis provides substantial support for Proposition 1, which links empathetic leadership with psychological safety. Employees are more likely to speak openly when they expect leaders to respond to concerns with understanding rather than dismissal or unnecessary interpersonal punishment. Empathetic responses may therefore reduce the perceived risks associated with asking questions, reporting problems, acknowledging uncertainty, or challenging established practices.

Evidence from Bani-Melhem et al. (2021) is particularly relevant. Their study of frontline employees found that empathetic leadership mitigated the negative effects associated with low psychological safety and supported proactive work behavior. More recent evidence from Du & Xie (2025) also positioned leader empathy as an important mechanism associated with employees' psychological safety. These findings align with the broader psychological safety literature, which identifies leadership behavior and interpersonal relationships as important conditions shaping whether employees feel safe to contribute (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

Psychological safety therefore appears to perform a bridging function in the model. Empathetic leadership communicates interpersonal acceptance, while psychological safety reflects employees' interpretation of the environment created by such behavior. This distinction is theoretically important. A leader may intend to behave empathetically, but the motivational benefits of that behavior are unlikely to emerge fully unless employees actually experience the workplace as safe for interpersonal risk-taking.

4.3 From psychological safety to employee engagement

The literature also supports Propositions 2 and 3, although the evidence is stronger for the broader leadership-engagement relationship than for empathetic leadership specifically. Work engagement depends partly on whether employees possess sufficient resources to invest energy, attention, and persistence in their roles. Meta-analyzed evidence indicates that personal, developmental, job, and social resources are positively related to work engagement (Mazzetti et al., 2023). Empathetic leadership may contribute to this resource environment by offering understanding, support, and opportunities for constructive communication.

Psychological safety strengthens this explanation. Employees who fear embarrassment, rejection, or negative consequences may devote considerable energy to self-protection. This can reduce the energy available for meaningful involvement in work. In contrast, psychologically safe employees can direct greater attention toward learning, collaboration, and contribution. Siyal (2023) found that psychological safety mediated the relationship between inclusive leadership and work engagement. Although inclusive and empathetic leadership are not identical, the finding provides useful evidence for the proposed mechanism because both approaches involve leader accessibility, acceptance, and relational support. The conceptual contribution is therefore not simply that empathy increases engagement. Rather, empathy may create relational conditions under which employees feel sufficiently secure to invest themselves more fully in their work.

4.4 Engagement as the pathway to performance

The final stage of the framework receives particularly strong empirical support. Corbeanu & Iliescu (2023) meta-analysis reported an overall correlation of $r = .37$ between work engagement and job

performance across 166 independent samples. A separate meta-analysis by Neuber et al. (2022) similarly found a substantial positive relationship between work engagement and task performance. These findings support the argument that vigor, dedication, and absorption have meaningful implications for how employees perform their roles.

Accordingly, Proposition 4 provides the principal integrative contribution of this paper. Empathetic leadership is proposed to influence performance through a sequential process:

This pathway helps explain why empathy should matter for organizational outcomes. Empathy does not improve performance merely because employees feel positively toward an understanding leader. Rather, leader empathy can influence the psychological conditions under which employees operate. Greater safety facilitates participation and openness. These conditions can strengthen engagement, which in turn supports performance.

The relationship should however, not be interpreted as automatic or universally positive. Empathy without appropriate boundaries may impose emotional demands on leaders. Recent literature highlights the possibility of empathy-related emotional stress and strain when leaders are expected to absorb employees' difficulties continuously (Yusoff, 2026). Empathetic leadership should therefore be understood as a "balanced understanding" rather than an "unrestricted emotional accommodation".

Overall, the findings support the four propositions while also exposing an important research gap. Evidence linking psychological safety, engagement, and performance is comparatively fully developed, whereas direct research examining the entire empathetic leadership pathway remains limited. The proposed model therefore represents a theoretically grounded explanation that requires further empirical testing.

5. Implications

The proposed framework has implications for both leadership theory and organizational practice. Its central contribution is to explain why empathetic leadership may matter for employee performance. Rather than treating empathy as a desirable interpersonal characteristic alone, the framework positions it as a relational leadership capability that can shape psychological safety, engagement, and subsequent performance.

5.1 Theoretical implications

First, the paper extends the developing literature on empathetic leadership by specifying the mechanisms through which empathy may translate into workplace outcomes. Existing research has associated leader empathy with affective, relational, attitudinal, well-being, and performance outcomes (Kock et al., 2019; Muss et al., 2026). However, these outcomes have often been examined separately. The proposed sequential pathway integrates them by arguing that empathetic leadership creates relational conditions that promote psychological safety, which can subsequently strengthen employee engagement and performance. This contributes to a more process-oriented understanding of empathetic leadership.

Second, the framework connects social exchange theory with job demands-resources theory. Social exchange theory explains employees' tendency to reciprocate supportive and respectful leader behavior, while JD-R theory explains how leadership can provide social and psychological resources that facilitate engagement. This integration responds to calls for greater attention to the mechanisms through which leadership influences work engagement rather than continually treating leadership styles as isolated predictors (Bakker et al., 2023; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020, 2021). Meta-analyzed evidence shows that several positive leadership approaches influence engagement through shared

mechanisms, including resources, trust, psychological needs, and positive social exchanges (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021).

Third, the model reinforces psychological safety as an important bridge between leader behavior and employee motivation. Psychological safety has become particularly relevant to leadership, learning, work experience, and performance in complex organizational environments (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Frazier et al., 2017).

5.2 Managerial and practical implications

For organizations, the framework suggests that empathy should form part of leadership selection and development. Leadership development programs such as active listening, perspective-taking, recognition of employee concerns, and context-sensitive communication can strengthen behaviors. HR practitioners should therefore assess not only leaders' technical competence but also their capacity to understand and respond constructively to employees. Muss et al. (2026) similarly identify leaders, HR managers, and organizational decision-makers as important actors in shaping empathetic leadership practices.

Organizations should also treat psychological safety and engagement as indicators of whether empathetic leadership is producing meaningful outcomes. Leaders can promote safety by responding constructively to questions, mistakes, disagreements, and employee voice. At the same time, empathy should not be interpreted as avoiding accountability. Effective empathetic leadership combines understanding with clear expectations and appropriate boundaries. Thus, organizations should develop leaders who can demonstrate concern for employees while maintaining performance standards and protecting their own capacity to lead effectively.

6. Suggestions for future research

The proposed framework creates several opportunities for future research. First, empirical studies should test the complete sequential relationship proposed in this paper: Although evidence supports individual relationships within this pathway, relatively few studies have examined these constructs simultaneously. Recent reviews similarly show that empathetic leadership research remains fragmented across different outcomes and conceptualizations of empathy (Muss et al., 2026). Longitudinal and multi-wave studies would be particularly valuable because they could establish sequential relationships more convincingly than cross-sectional designs.

Second, future research should examine contextual and cultural boundary conditions. Empathetic behaviors may not be interpreted identically across organizations, occupations, or national cultures. Leadership expectations, power distance, organizational climate, and the nature of employee-leader relationships could strengthen or weaken the proposed effects. Existing research on related leadership approaches demonstrates that psychological safety and engagement can operate differently across organizational contexts (Siyal, 2023). Comparative studies across countries, industries, and public and private organizations could therefore improve the generalizability of the framework.

Third, researchers should examine potential moderators such as workload, job demands, leader-member exchange quality, virtual working arrangements, and individual employee differences. Such research could identify when empathy is particularly valuable and when its effects are weaker.

Finally, greater attention should be given to the potential costs and limits of empathetic leadership. Empathy should not automatically be assumed to produce positive outcomes. Sustained emotional involvement may increase leaders' emotional strain and exhaustion, particularly in roles characterized by intensive interpersonal demands (Simon et al., 2022; Yusoff, 2026). Future research should therefore

investigate whether leader well-being, organizational support, and appropriate interpersonal boundaries moderate the benefits of empathy. Experimental and intervention studies could also determine whether empathy-focused leadership development produces lasting improvements in psychological safety, engagement, and performance. Such research would help establish not only whether empathetic leadership works, but when, for whom, and under what organizational conditions it is most effective.

7. Conclusion

Empathy is becoming more and more relevant to leadership in workplaces where employees are expected to collaborate, communicate openly, adapt to change, and maintain high levels of performance. This paper has argued that empathetic leadership should be understood not merely as interpersonal sensitivity but as a relational leadership capability through which leaders recognize employees' perspectives and emotions and respond with appropriate understanding and support. Existing evidence indicates that leader empathy can influence employee attitudes, relationships, well-being, and performance, although the field remains comparatively fragmented (Kock et al., 2019; Muss et al., 2026).

Drawing on social exchange theory and job demands-resources theory, the paper developed an integrated framework linking empathetic leadership, psychological safety, employee engagement, and employee performance. The framework proposes that empathetic leadership creates relational conditions that reduce interpersonal risk and strengthen psychological safety. Psychological safety, in turn, enables employees to invest themselves more fully in their work. Greater engagement can subsequently contribute to stronger performance. This reasoning is consistent with established evidence regarding the importance of psychological safety in contemporary organizations and the positive relationship between work engagement and job performance (Corbeanu & Iliescu, 2023; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

The paper therefore shifts attention from asking simply whether empathy matters in leadership to explaining how and through which mechanisms it may matter. At the same time, empathetic leadership should not be equated with unlimited emotional accommodation or reduced accountability. Its value lies in combining genuine understanding of employees with appropriate boundaries and organizational expectations. The proposed framework offers a foundation for future empirical research and for leadership practices aimed at developing workplaces in which employees feel understood, safe to contribute, engaged in their roles, and capable of performing effectively.

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