

# 6 expressions that empathetic leaders avoid

These common phrases might come from a caring place, but it's important to ensure your words communicate empathy and understanding.



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BY **JUDITH HUMPHREY**

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“Empathy” is quite the buzzword these days, and for good reason. A recent Catalyst **report**, “The Power of Empathy in Times of Crisis and Beyond,” shows that employees who have empathetic managers and leaders are more creative and engaged.

In the lexicon of leaders, “empathy” is **viewed as a superpower**, with a uniformly positive meaning. It derives from the Greek word *empathēia*, which comes from “in” and “feeling.” When we relate to the feelings of others, we show empathy.

Sensitive leaders show empathy in the form of care, concern, and understanding. If an employee appears sad, depressed, or is self-isolating, a good leader often reaches out to them. But well-intended empathy can backfire. At times, we may think we are being empathetic, but we end up insulting or hurting the very person we wanted to support. The following six expressions represent subtle missteps:

### 1. “I HEARD YOU’RE UPSET”

This slip happens when we mention that we’ve been discussing a person’s well-being with someone else.

Suppose you’re the boss and someone on your team tells you, “Rebecca is feeling down.” So with the best of intentions you go to Rebecca and tell her you’ve heard she’s upset—or (even worse) that a specific colleague said she’s upset. It may seem to you an act of empathy, but think how Rebecca feels when she hears that other people are talking about her and her apparent troubles. If you are going to show empathy, don’t bring a third party into the conversation.

### 2. “ARE YOU DEPRESSED?”

Another faux pas lies in labeling someone’s mental state.

If you feel an employee is experiencing difficulties, offering your diagnosis will only make things worse. Giving an unscientific “reading” on the situation when you are not a medical professional is out of line. The best thing to do if you suspect that someone in your organization is depressed or burnt out is to observe the symptoms—lack of motivation, or failure to complete projects—and provide support to help that individual.

### 3. “YOU LOOK DOWN”

In this pandemic period, we may not look like our usual vibrant selves. But don’t assume the worst from someone’s looks.

Find **something kind to say** to everyone, especially those who appear to need a pick-me-up. If a colleague looks “down,” compliment them on something they’re wearing, or note something positive they’ve done. Ask about an aspect of their life that is positive— or mention a recent achievement at work.

This will be so much better for your colleague than reinforcing negative (and possibly false) assumptions. You just might find out that they are not down, but were deep in thought and you confused that contemplative state with unhappiness.

#### **4. “HEY, WHAT’S UP?”**

If you see someone who may be in need a touch of empathy, a general “Hey, what’s up?” won’t do the trick. This casual expression can seem flip to someone who needs a real dose of empathy. So many people today have deep concerns about life, their families, or the workplace. A better, more truly empathetic way of speaking to them is to listen by asking genuine questions. You might inquire: “Are your kids back in school?” or “What projects are you now working on?” Probe gently, rather than tossing flimsy clichés in their direction.

#### **5. “I’M CONCERNED ABOUT YOU”**

This expression, though caring, immediately puts the other person in a negative light. When we hear someone say to us, “I’m concerned about you,” or “I’m worried about you,” we often feel much worse. Sure, the speaker might be trying to express empathy, but that concern comes freighted with negative assumptions.

Instead of saying you’re concerned, *show* genuine concern by speaking with that person, asking questions, and spending time with them in a constructive way. You might take them to lunch or have a friendly chat about a shared interest. Giving your time and mental energy is far more empathetic than just stating that you are concerned.

#### **6. “IF YOU CAN’T FINISH THAT PROJECT, I’LL UNDERSTAND”**

Though this comes from a kind place, the worst thing you can do for an overwhelmed employee is to undercut them. Implicit in this expression is your low opinion of that person’s abilities.

According to a *Harvard Business Review* [article](#) on managing an employee with depression, “motivation in depressed employees plummets in the face of threats and punishment.” If you suggest an underperforming employee should step back from a task, you may feel you are doing that individual a favor. But it may actually feel like you’re punishing them, and that could lower their sense of self-worth. This is particularly true for someone facing personal challenges.

Instead, work on a plan that will enable that member of your team to meet targets and succeed. Perhaps other team members can help, or the deadline can be extended, or the project can be

broken down into more manageable chunks. Helping your employees achieve success is the best form of empathy.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judith Humphrey is founder of [The Humphrey Group](#), a premier leadership communications firm headquartered in Toronto. She is a regular columnist for *Fast Company* and is the author of three books: *Impromptu: Leading in the Moment* (2018), *Speaking as a Leader: How to Lead Every Time You Speak* (2012), and *Taking the Stage: How Women Can Speak Up, Stand Out, and Succeed* (2014) [More](#)

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