



20^{STATE OF} WORKPLACE
24 EMPATHY

**Empathy
Under Pressure
Pouring from an
Empty Empathy Cup**



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A Note from Our CEO

“Stable and secure with some pixie dust of innovation.” Those are the words I used to describe our company’s strategic lens during our annual Vision conference this year. Why the focus on stability? Many organizations are struggling as high interest rates perpetuate challenging market conditions. This puts the very best leaders in tough situations—having to make hard decisions that, even when handled with care, can be viewed as anything but empathetic.

As we look at the state of empathy in the workplace, where does this leave us? Data points to burnout among CEOs who have historically displayed a much more positive outlook than employees, with a 24-point jump in self-reported mental health issues.

Pressures continue to mount for employees as well. On average, one in two employees say they’ve experienced a mental health issue in the past year. Perhaps even more concerning, our findings show a significant rise in workplace toxicity, with just over half of CEOs and Gen Z affirming their workplaces are toxic.

Employees need to pay the bills and CEOs need to keep their companies stable. Nobody wins in this scenario, and it’s reflected in a 23-point gap between employees’ and CEOs’ perceptions of empathy in each other.

The data also points to a lack of understanding around what empathy is and how to effectively put it into action. Barriers persist, especially for CEOs who feel they’ll be challenged or viewed as weak if they use empathy. This “empathy stigma” gets in the way of showing empathy in their day to day, which in turn can have a negative ripple effect on company culture.

In fact, the most significant gaps we see in the data revolve around putting empathy into action. All audiences surveyed largely value empathy, yet the majority don’t experience it in their day-to-day interactions. **In essence, empathy is in high demand but low on execution.**

Many organizations lack a clear game plan for building a culture of empathy, and understandably so—it’s a challenging and ambiguous goal with no one-size-fits-all solution. This year, our findings are divided into two parts: This first report focuses on the state of mental wellbeing and workplace toxicity while our follow-up report, launching in July 2024, explores the key behaviors that promote empathy and provides organizations with strategic intelligence for putting empathy into action.

One thing is certain: There will always be something that gets in the way of empathy. The only way forward is to celebrate our empathy wins and recognize that on any given day, we could all use a little grace.



Jon Shanahan,
Businessolver President and CEO

Empathy Under Pressure

A staggering 55% of CEOs and 50% of employees have experienced a mental health issue in the past year, according to our ninth annual State of Workplace Empathy findings. Gen Z self-reports the highest mental health issues at 65%. Likewise, 52% of Gen Z say their workplace is toxic. And more than half of CEOs agree, up 10 points year-over-year (YOY). Given this information, it comes as no surprise that double-digit empathy gaps persist across how CEOs, HR, and employees view empathy in each other.



I do have a life outside of work. They only see me in one thing, I would like to be seen as a bigger person. I work really, really long hours... [and] I would like them to know that I'm more than just a CEO. I'm a father, I'm a husband, I'm a fisherman, I'm a sh***y golfer.

- Finance CEO interview,
2024 State of Workplace Empathy

How Empathetic Do You Think Each Is Currently?

● CEOs ● HR PROFESSIONALS ● EMPLOYEES



My CEO is Empathetic



My HR Professional is Empathetic



My Employees are Empathetic



↓ Employee-CEO gap =
23-point gap
(-9 points YOY)

↓ HR-CEO gap =
19-point gap
(-5 points YOY)



CEOs (81%), HR (72%), and employees (67%) all 'agree' that companies view someone with mental health issues as weak or a burden.

A pervasive mental health stigma and other worrisome barriers to demonstrating empathy in the workplace are perpetuating these gaps, including being viewed as weak and coworker intimidation concerns.

On the brighter side, organizational empathy has rebounded for HR professionals (+11 points YOY) and Millennials (+12 points YOY), and employee motivation shows strong improvement (+10 points YOY).

The contrasting nature of these findings can only be explained by the volatile, polarizing, and tough economic times we live in—conditions that put empathy under extreme pressure but have yet to extinguish its flame.

Organizational Empathy by Generation



Revelations in this year's findings call for an empathy evolution in U.S. organizations. Empathy increasingly means more and holds far deeper significance than its textbook definition. Leaders must quickly evolve and adapt their understanding of empathy while dismantling the stigmas that hinder it.

– Rae Shanahan, Chief Strategy Officer, Businessolver

An Empathy Evolution: What is Empathy, Really?

As we reconcile the highs and lows in this year's findings, it's important to recognize that empathy means something different to everyone. While we ask survey participants to think of empathy as "the ability to understand and/or experience the feelings or perspective of another," it's difficult to fully define the complex, multi-faceted, and individualistic nature of empathy.

Empathy ebbs and flows with the forces at play in our lives, and when exhausted, it has its limits. Without a mindful, intentional approach, empathy can take a backseat, especially under stressful conditions.

To that end, the persistent empathy gaps we've seen over the last nine years reveal the empathy *we feel and value* isn't always effectively actioned or recognized in each other. In fact, the most significant empathy gaps of all center around putting empathy into action, or how people and organizations demonstrate empathy in the workplace.

Data Points to Burnout Among CEOs as Mental Health Issues Spike and Empathy Falls

- ↑ CEOs with Mental Health Issues: **55%** (+24 points YOY)
- ↑ Workplace Toxicity: **52%** (+10 points YOY)
- ↓ My Organization is Empathetic: **88%** (-5 points YOY)
- ↓ My HR Professional is Empathetic: **84%** (-4 points YOY)
- ↓ My Employees are Empathetic: **86%** (-6 points YOY)



For example, 86% of respondents say understanding and/or respecting the need for flexible working hours is an 'important' demonstration of empathy, yet only 42% say they've experienced it—a 44-point gap.

It begs the question: **Do leaders know how to support a modern-day workforce both at the strategic level with an empathetic culture and with their day-to-day behaviors?** For instance, 80% of CEOs believe that being empathetic means being nice to others all the time, but our data reveals empathy runs much deeper.

Employees want expressions of empathy that go far beyond surface level, such as workplace flexibility, career roadmaps, professional development, and meaningful diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) programming. Organizations must go beyond mere gestures to provide a strategic level of empathetic support.

Putting Empathy Into Action

"A Game Plan for Putting Empathy into Action," the second part of our study launching in July 2024, will provide insights to support organizations and individuals in upping their empathy game by revealing the behaviors most strongly correlated with positive perceptions of empathy. **The foundation of an empathetic culture rests on the ability to support employees across 3 pillars, which include 20 behaviors examined in the next release of our study.**



80% of CEOs believe that being empathetic means being nice to others all the time



Support the Whole Professional

The professional persona seeks meaningful career development, clear roadmaps for advancement, greater autonomy, and consideration for flexible working arrangements among other meaningful behaviors rooted in empathy.



Support the Whole Person

Employees are whole individuals whose personal and professional lives are inherently intertwined. They expect employers to acknowledge and support their need to balance responsibilities at work and home.



Support their Community

Employees crave a sense of belonging within their teams and communities at work and beyond. From organized initiatives like DEIB to individualized efforts like going the extra mile to help a colleague, supporting one's community takes empathetic behavior to the next level.

Pouring From an Empty Empathy Cup: Mental Health, Workplace Toxicity, and Benefits

Empathy is not dead despite post-pandemic downward trends, but empathy does have its limits. On any given day, any one of us could be pouring from an empty empathy cup. This is particularly true when considering this year's mental health findings.

Our data reveals significant mental health challenges across different audiences over the past year with 50% of all employees and 55% of CEOs, up a staggering 24 points from 2023, experiencing mental health issues in the past year.

“

I've heard other companies actually offer mental health days. I have to just say I'm sick if I'm like feeling sad or having a bad week, taking a day off for my mental health wouldn't be a valid excuse in my field.

– Healthcare employee interview,
2024 State of Workplace Empathy

Who is Experiencing Mental Health Issues?

Within the past year, have you experienced some type of mental health issue such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, burnout or obsessive-compulsive disorder? (Yes/No)



CEOs



HR Professionals



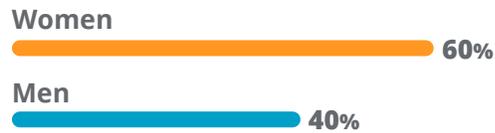
Employees

Who is Experiencing Mental Health Issues?

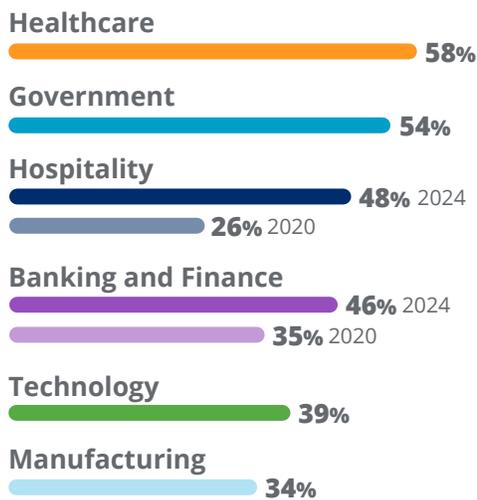
Where people work is not a driver of mental health issues



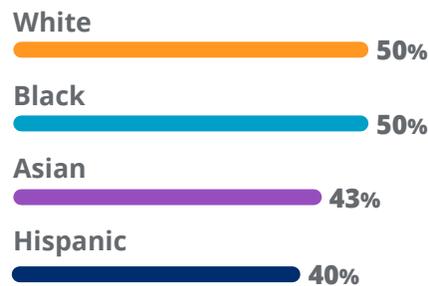
Women are much more likely to cite mental health issues than men



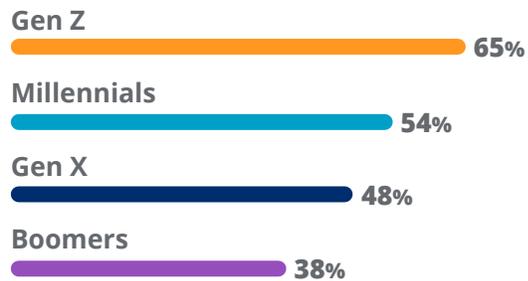
Healthcare and government respondents cite the highest incidents of mental health issues, but banking and hospitality saw significant increases since 2020



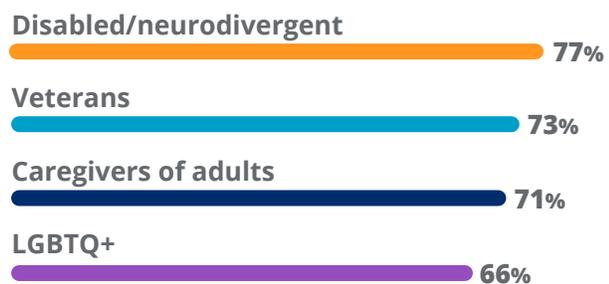
Ethnicity matters: Black and White employees are more likely to cite mental health issues



Gen Z is almost twice as likely to report a mental health issue compared to Boomers



Disabled, veteran, and caregiver respondents are significantly more likely to report a mental health issue compared to the average employee



The Mental Health Stigma Persists

As concerning as these numbers are, the incidence of mental health issues may actually be underreported as data suggests a strong mental health stigma exists across all audiences with 81% of CEOs, 72% of HR, and 67% of employees in agreement that companies view someone with mental health issues as weak or a burden.

9 OUT **OF** **10**

In our survey of over 3,100 employees, HR pros, and CEOs, 9 out of 10 total respondents agree that mental health is just as important as physical health.

Companies Still View Someone with Mental Health Issues as Weak or a Burden



 CEOs

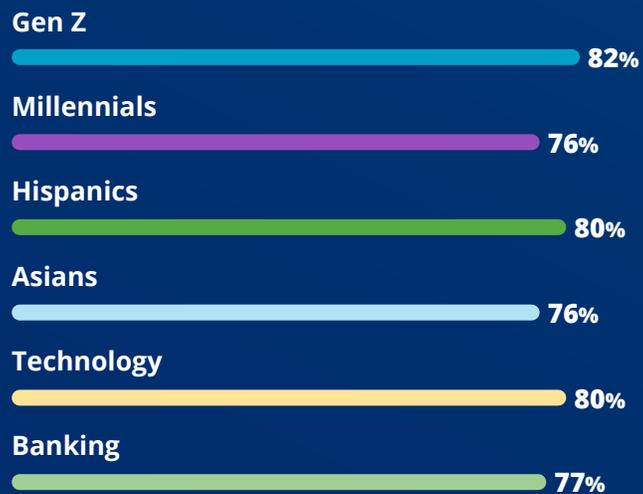


 HR Professionals



 Employees

Most likely groups to say that companies still view someone with mental health issues as weak or a burden



Workplace Toxicity Rises Alongside Mental Health Issues

The decline in mental wellbeing isn't surprising—the post-COVID era has been fraught with challenges from every angle over the past four years, from financial strife to political tensions. But this year our data brought forward another instigator: Workplace toxicity. Half of all CEOs and one in three employees view their workplaces as toxic.

Overall, 42% of total respondents agree or strongly agree that their workplace is toxic with CEOs (52%) and Gen Z (52%) most likely to feel their culture is toxic. Data also shows that work mode has an impact on perceived toxicity. Based on total respondents, **remote workers (24%) are significantly less likely to view their company culture as toxic.** A 2022 study by Capterra affirms this finding with 70% of HR leaders reporting fewer complaints about toxic behavior after shifting to hybrid or remote work.



Then you just look like a weakling, to be quite honest. I would never feel comfortable—like we can't tell them how we need a mental health day.

– Healthcare employee interview, 2024 State of Workplace Empathy

My Workplace is Toxic

Perceptions of workplace toxicity are on the rise for CEOs and employees



CEOs Agree
24% Strongly Agree



HR Professionals Agree
14% Strongly Agree



Employees Agree
14% Strongly Agree

Respondents who say their workplace is toxic by work arrangement



Increase in Mental Health Incidents Among Those Who Work in a Toxic Environment

This year's findings suggest a strong association between toxicity in the workplace and mental health issues: Overall, employees who say that their workplace is toxic are 47% more likely to cite mental health issues compared to those who do not cite a toxic workplace. For CEOs, this is even higher at 64%.

	CEOs	Employees
Percent who say their workplace is toxic	52%	35%
Those who experienced a mental health issue and said their workplace is toxic	69%	63%
Those who experienced a mental health issue and said their workplace is not toxic	42%	43%
Increase in likelihood of mental health issues for those who say they work in a toxic workplace	64%	47%

Our data likewise suggests a relationship between the perception of workplace toxicity and the stigma associated with mental health issues.

While the mental health stigma could be perpetuating workplace toxicity, findings also point to potential psychological safety concerns. Mindy Shoss, PhD, an industrial-organizational psychologist, notes that "toxic workplace" is an abstract term but can be summed up in a single word: Fear. "If I had to distill it down to a core theme, that theme would be fear," Shoss said. "Toxic workplaces drain all the energy and excitement out of employees and replace it with fear."



Respondents who say their workplace is toxic are significantly more likely to agree that mental health issues are viewed as a sign of weakness or a burden

Employees and CEOs Increasingly Feel Intimidated by Coworkers



CEOs feel intimidated
by coworkers



HR Professionals feel
intimidated by coworkers



Employees feel
intimidated by coworkers

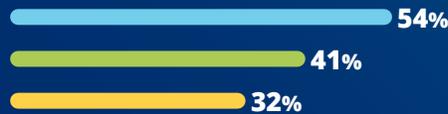
Data Points to a Stigma Associated with Demonstrating Empathy in the Workplace

- CEOs
- HR PROFESSIONALS
- EMPLOYEES

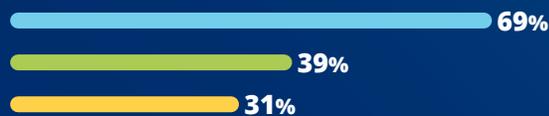
I will be challenged on decisions if I use empathy



I will not be respected as much if I demonstrate empathy



Being empathetic will make me a pushover



DEIB Efforts Backslide

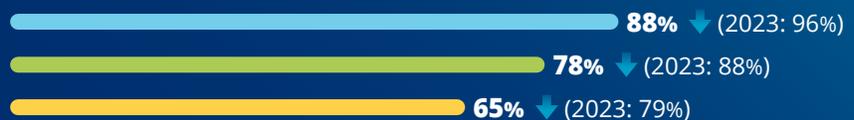
Fewer respondents, especially employees, feel that DEIB efforts are having a positive impact on feelings of authentic self, belonging, and connectedness

- CEOs
- HR PROFESSIONALS
- EMPLOYEES

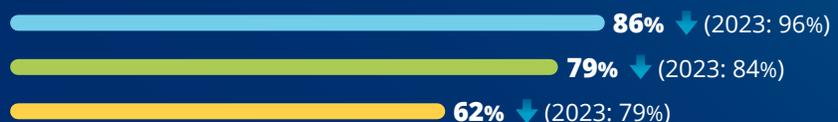
I feel like I can be my true authentic self when I'm at work due to DEIB efforts



I feel like I belong at my company due to DEIB efforts



I feel connected to my peers at work due to DEIB efforts



This year's findings also show that respondents who said their company culture is toxic are more likely to call for an empathy evolution at their organization. When asked if the current state of empathy at their organization is sufficient or needs to evolve, 63% of employees who cite their workplace as toxic said empathy at their organization needs to evolve versus 48% of average employees.

The Current State of Empathy at My Organization Needs to Evolve

● CEOs ● HR PROFESSIONALS ● EMPLOYEES

Individuals who think their organization's culture is toxic and empathy needs to evolve



Individuals who think their organization's culture needs to evolve



Breaking Down Mental Health Barriers with Benefits and Open Dialogue

It's impossible to talk about mental health without acknowledging financial stress as another key driver. A report by Mercer found that 80% of employees are facing potential burnout this year with financial stress reported by 43% of those at risk. "We are heading in the wrong direction, especially in the U.S.," says Kate Bravery, Knowledge and Insights Global Leader for Mercer. "What we're doing today is not having a material impact on physical or mental health. And that's really worrying."

But it's not just financial stress that's fueling poor mental health, it's the high cost of mental health care. According to a 2023 study by Mental Health America, over half of U.S. adults with a mental illness (55%) do not receive treatment, leaving more than 28 million adults without mental health care. The primary barrier is cost, with 42% of individuals stating they cannot afford mental health care. Additionally, 17% report that their health insurance does not adequately cover treatment costs.

And, more than two-fifths of Americans do not seek help for conditions like anxiety and depression due to financial constraints, even among those with insurance.



Over half of U.S. adults with mental illness (55%) do not receive treatment



Does Your Company Currently Offer Any Mental Health Programs or Benefits?

	CEOs	HR Professionals	Employees
Yes	70%	65%	58%
No, not currently	24%	24%	27%
I don't know	1%	3%	10%

Outside of cost, our findings show there's both a lack of awareness and underutilization of mental health benefits.

While employees (+8 points YOY) show improved awareness for their mental health benefits in 2024, over a third of employees say that their workplace doesn't currently offer mental health benefits and another 10% say they don't know if their workplace offers those benefits.

Beyond awareness for benefits, underutilization of mental health benefits is a significant issue. Substantial gaps exist between the mental health benefits employees say are important and those they're aware of and use. Specifically, on average, there are 60-point gaps between the benefits employees say are important and their awareness of these benefits. More concerning are the average 70-point gaps between the benefits employees say are important and those they use.

This awareness-to-utilization gap highlights a critical issue: It's not enough to simply offer mental health benefits. Employers must do more to drive awareness and accessibility while dismantling the stigma associated with mental health issues in the workplace.



They give us a wellness day every month...which isn't much, but it's something.

– Government employee interview, 2024 State of Workplace Empathy



Top 6 Most Valuable Benefits and Resources Employees Say Help Them Care for Their Mental Health

While 58% of employees are aware of mental health support in their benefits packages, 20% rate these resources as “basic”

Top Benefits Employees Want	Importance to Employees	What Employees Know are Offered	What Employees are Using
Open-door policies	91%	36%	14%
Mental health benefits offered at enrollment	90%	35%	10%
Employee assistance programs (EAPs)	89%	37%	12%
Flexible working hours	89%	36%	23%
Access to online mental health resources or clinics	89%	33%	9%
Encouraged to take breaks away from work	88%	26%	13%

Flexibility is paramount to mental health: Flexible work hours (89%) along with remote work (84%) options are perceived as primary mental health benefits, supporting employees by giving them the space and autonomy to work where, when, or how they choose. Whether due to cost, accessibility, stigma, or otherwise, employees are less likely to use programs and benefits that explicitly address mental health, such as EAPs, even though they also sit at the top of their “most wanted” list. Instead, all audiences cite family and friends as their primary sources of mental health support.

While there’s work to be done to boost mental health benefits along with awareness and utilization, data reveals that despite a persistent mental health stigma, 73% of employees believe their manager emphasizes the importance of mental health along with 83% of HR and 92% of CEOs.

Creating an Open and Safe Work Environment

The data makes it crystal clear that workplace toxicity and mental health issues are closely connected. Toxicity has a widespread impact on the entire workplace culture and on every person in the workplace, from the C-suite to individual contributors.

There’s about 90% agreement across employees, HR, and CEOs that it’s important for senior leadership to openly discuss mental health issues to create a safe environment for other employees to follow suit. But beyond creating space to discuss mental health, there’s a pressing need to address psychological safety and the diverse value of empathetic behaviors at work.



Employees Prioritize Flexibility as a Leading Benefit Even Over Compensation

Looking beyond mental health benefits at the top benefits employees say demonstrate that an organization is empathetic, it's clear employees increasingly seek autonomy over their schedules, favoring flexible work hours (94%) and flexible locations (90%) as key empathetic benefits—even over annual compensation increases (88%).

Top 15 Empathetic Benefits

	Demonstration of Empathy	What Employees Say Their Employer Offers	Gap Between Empathetic and Offered
Flexible work hours	94%	38%	56
EAPs	94%	37%	57
Wellness days or weeks	93%	22%	71
Paid time off	92%	62% (-10 points YOY)	30
Paid maternity leave	92%	42%	50
Extended mental health benefits	92%	23%	69
Employer contributions to financial plans	91%	60% (-9 points YOY)	31
Core benefits (e.g. medical, vision, dental)	91%	58% (-12 points YOY)	33
Paid paternity leave	91%	42%	49
Family benefits (e.g. paid after school programs; daycare)	91%	19%	72
Flexible work location	90%	35%	55
Educational programs	89%	34%	55
Voluntary benefits	88%	34%	54
Annual compensation increases, regardless of company performance and overall economy	88%	30%	58
Company-wide rest days	87%	11%	76



While traditional benefits remain critical, workplace flexibility (in all its evolving forms) is increasingly becoming table stakes in the scheme of what employees must have to support both their personal and professional lives. Even so, our findings reveal large gaps (54 points on average) remain between the flexibility employees desire and what they say their employer offers.



I still have to be in the office every day, eight to five, except for I do work from home two days a week, which are a big benefit to me...those work from home days are kind of like getting back some time...and the company, more or less, functions completely the same whether I'm in the office or not.

– Government employee interview, 2024 State of Workplace Empathy



Employers Must Address the Intersection of Benefits Perceived as Highly Empathetic and Their Current Benefits Offering to Support the Whole Person at Work

While data highlights the high value of these benefits and a misalignment between importance versus execution, it's critical to examine additional factors such as employees' awareness for benefits which ultimately affects utilization.

According to [Businessolver's 2024 Benefits Insights report](#), an annual study that looks at employee engagement, behaviors, and understanding within benefits, 84% of employees are confused about their benefits. But when empathetic HR strategies are in place, such as year-round communications, AI-powered personalization, and right-time, right-place reminders, employee benefits engagement doubles, helping to close the awareness gap and drive utilization when employees likely need their benefits most.

CEOs Are Under Pressure and Burning Out

The pressure CEOs face is unprecedented. Not only are they trying to keep their organizations running during challenging economic times, but for many, it's compounded by COVID-tail pressure—meaning companies that experienced high demand during the pandemic are now “normalizing,” leading to layoffs, cost cutting, and a focus on lean operations as high interest rates persist. As such, 2023 was dubbed “the year of efficiency” culminating in 300,000 U.S. workers laid off.

As a testament to the pressure CEOs face, a 2022 Deloitte survey found 70% of C-suite leaders said they'd thought about quitting for a job that better supports their wellbeing. In 2023, a record number of CEOs did just that—1,914 to be exact, marking a 55% increase from the previous year.

Our data reveals that the hard decisions CEOs are making in the face of board and shareholder pressure, not to mention pressure from employees to increase base wages and prioritize flexibility in all its evolving forms, is taking its toll.



As the CEO, during the pandemic, we were trying to stay afloat, right? And now we are tasked with ensuring that we can recover from the financial challenges we experienced, having to shift how we do the work so that we are never caught like we were in 2020. And unfortunately, that comes at the cost of being able to be present.

– Healthcare CEO interview, 2024
State of Workplace Empathy

CEOs with self-reported mental health issues

55%
↑ 24 points
from 2023

Like so many of their employees, CEOs are struggling with their mental health. This year, 55% of CEOs said they experienced a mental health issue in the past year, up 24 points over 2023. At 60%, Millennial CEOs are the most likely to have experienced a mental health issue in the form of burnout, anxiety, depression, loneliness, or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

CEOs who say their workplace is toxic

52%
↑ 10 points
from 2023

Additionally, the revelation that over half (52%) of CEOs view their organization's culture as toxic is a striking statistic. Likewise, Millennial (60%) and Gen X (51%) CEOs are more likely to report a mental health issue than Boomers (24%).





Beyond Mental Health, CEOs Face Other Substantial Barriers to Empathy

Perhaps even psychological safety concerns that prevent them from executing on empathy in their day-to-day



I feel intimidated by coworkers



I will be challenged on my decisions for the business if I use empathy

These findings are not reflective of happy, healthy CEOs. Instead, these are not-so-fearless leaders in need of lifelines.

As Jamil Zaki, professor of psychology at Stanford University, explains in a Harvard Business Review article, “Our tumultuous times have saturated organizations with anxiety and exhaustion. Employees of all types are burned out and desperately need empathy from their leaders. But leaders are burned-out too, and may feel as if they’re pouring from an empty cup.”

Whether due to burnout or other barriers, CEOs are under pressure to deliver results in an economic landscape where results are increasingly hard to come by. This puts empathy under pressure for CEOs who have historically trended very high in their empathy perceptions.

CEOs’ Empathy Perceptions Fall Slightly but Noticeably Across the Board

↓ **My Organization is Empathetic**
-5 points YOY

↓ **My HR Professional is Empathetic**
-4 points YOY

↓ **My Employees are Empathetic**
-6 points YOY

Another indicator of the pressure CEOs feel is their increasing desire to be seen a whole person while better balancing work and personal demands: 87% of CEOs say demonstrating that an employee’s family is equally as important as their job.

Empathy is an Execution Sport: Are CEOs Playing the Game?

While CEOs are without doubt contending with tremendous pressure, it’s also clear that there is a fundamental misalignment in how they perceive empathy in themselves versus how employees view CEOs’ expressions of empathy.

It’s human nature to judge others by their actions but judge ourselves by our intentions. This is a cognitive bias that no one, not even the best CEO, is immune to. As such, CEOs are much more likely to rate themselves as empathetic than employees and HR, who are both more tempered in their self-reported empathy.



65% of CEOs feel intimidated by coworkers





83% of CEOs believe empathy is undervalued by U.S. organizations

But while CEOs increasingly see the upside of empathy, they continue to struggle with displaying empathy at work. For instance, 83% of CEOs believe empathy is undervalued by U.S. organizations yet 37% maintain that empathy doesn't have a place in the workplace.

This juxtaposition is seen throughout the data and presents a paradox: **Empathy is largely valued by CEOs but barriers persist to putting empathy into action. This is a real concern as 55% of CEOs perceive themselves as having the most impact on building a culture of empathy.**

Could it be that for CEOs the path to empathy is paved with good intentions, but poor on execution? They think they're being empathetic and stewarding empathetic cultures, yet they're not effectively executing on empathetic culture—at least according to how employees rate them.



Real Barriers Persist to Putting the Empathy CEOs Say They Value into Tangible Action

As individuals, we're likely to give ourselves high marks for empathy—to think we're being empathetic, yet others don't perceive that same level of empathy. Beyond roles and authority, everyone wants to be seen, heard, and acknowledged as whole people with responsibilities outside of work that impact their professional lives. This is especially true for CEOs this year, who face the challenge of balancing work and home demands amid a tough economy.

Beyond execution, findings show that CEOs must evolve their understanding of empathy: 80% of CEOs say that being empathetic means being nice to others all the time versus 55% of employees and 62% of HR.

“
I thought empathy was sending flowers, you know, when someone was sick... doing something along those lines more sympathy than empathy.
 – Finance CEO interview, State of Workplace Empathy 2024



Breaking Down the Barriers to Empathy

Despite clearly seeing the upside of empathy, CEOs in particular continue to find it difficult to express empathy at work, a significant barrier to empathetic leadership. In fact, 63% (+4 points YOY) of CEOs agree it's hard to consistently demonstrate empathy in their day to day, and more than a quarter strongly agree. At 68%, CEOs at larger companies (1K+ employees) express even higher difficulty than the average.

CEOs are not alone, however, in feeling insecure about showing empathy in their day-to-day work life: 47% of HR professionals and 42% of employees agree, with Gen Z employees leading the way at 61% followed by Millennials at 46%.



Breaking Down the Barriers to Empathy

It's hard for me to consistently demonstrate empathy in my day-to-day life

Year	CEOs	HR Professionals	Employees
2024	63% <1K employees: 58%, 1K+ employees: 68%	47%	42% Gen Z: 61%, Millennials: 46%, Gen X: 41%, Boomers: 31%
2023	59%	47%	38%
2022	79%	60%	42%
2021	70%	53%	46%
2020	41%	40%	41%
2019	58%	47%	48%

42% of employees find it difficult to show empathy in the workplace while it remains a challenge for 63% of CEOs

For all audiences who indicate it's hard to consistently demonstrate empathy at work, but especially CEOs, concerns range from not being supported by peers, losing respect, not knowing how to express empathy, and not being raised to express empathy. A staggering 37% CEOs say empathy doesn't have a place in the workplace. Combine this knowledge with the fact that 55% of CEOs agree they are responsible for their company's culture and that makes empathy an uphill battle for many organizations.

Top Barriers to Empathy Among CEOs, HR, and Employees

You indicated that it is hard to consistently demonstrate empathy at work.
Which of the following are the biggest causes for that?

	CEOs	HR Professionals	Employees
Uninterested			
I'm too busy with work ¹	33% ²	32%	37%
Empathy doesn't have a place in the workplace	37%	30%	24%
I am not an empathetic person ³	23%	15%	18%

¹Boomers (45%), Gen X (38%), and Millennials (36%) are significantly more likely than Gen Z (25%) to say they're too busy.

²Millennial CEOs are the most likely to say they're too busy (34%) and that colleagues aren't supportive (46%) while Gen X CEOs (54%) feel their manager/leadership doesn't support being empathetic at work; Millennial CEOs (48%) share this sentiment. And Gen Z (50%) are the most likely to say empathy just doesn't have a place in the workplace.

³Gen Z (29%) is most inclined to say they're just not empathetic.

Unsupported

My manager or leadership doesn't support being empathetic at work	46%	31%	37%
My colleagues aren't supportive when I try to be empathetic	41%	32%	31%
I'll be viewed as weak	38%	18%	31%

Unskilled

Culturally I wasn't raised to show empathy	35%	18%	25%
I'm not sure how to express empathy ⁴	31%	23%	26%
I'm not sure what I should say or do ⁵	26%	25%	33%
I don't feel confident in my ability to be empathetic ⁵	25%	28%	25%

⁴Boomers (39%) and Gen Z (28%) are most likely to say they're unsure how to express empathy.

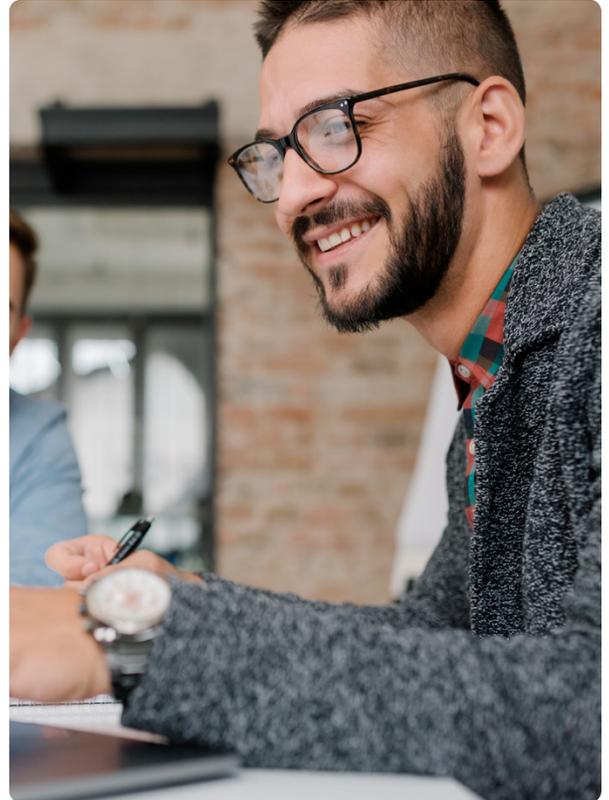
⁵Boomers (52%) are far more likely to say they're unsure what to say/do.



Formulating a Game Plan for Putting Empathy into Action

This year's findings underscore how empathy is evolving to carry much deeper meaning than its textbook definition. Employees seek meaningful demonstrations of empathy from their daily interactions with colleagues and leaders to their employee benefits. Despite this desire, however, data reveals that mental health issues, workplace toxicity, stigmas, and a virtual melting pot of other barriers are impeding true progress on the empathy front and fueling the persistent gaps in how cohorts perceive empathy in each other.

But we've yet to explore the most significant empathy gap of all: Execution. Part 2 of this year's study, "Empathy Under Pressure: A Game Plan for Putting Empathy into Action," takes a closer look at the behaviors employees, HR, and CEOs say are empathetic versus directly experienced in the workplace—revealing that certain behaviors are more strongly correlated with positive perceptions of empathy within organizations while others, like flexibility, are fast becoming a table stakes demonstration of empathy in the modern workplace.



Learn more in "Empathy Under Pressure: A Game Plan for Putting Empathy into Action," the second part of our report that outlines how to activate empathy in the workplace. Launching July 2024.



About the 2024 State of Workplace Empathy Study

Over the past nine years, Businessolver has studied the evolution of empathy in the workplace, hearing from collectively more than 20,000 employees, HR professionals, and CEOs about their views on a variety of workplace issues.

Our study examines the behaviors and benefits that make a workplace empathetic. In this study, empathy is defined as “the ability to understand and/or experience the feelings or perspectives of another.”

In March of 2024, a third-party firm fielded the online survey of more than 3,000 participants across six industries: financial services, government, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, and government. To qualify for the survey, respondents needed to be 18 years or older, a U.S. resident, and be employed full-time or part-time within their respective organization with 100 or more employees.

Our survey included subgroups for gender, ethnicity, parent/non-parent status, veteran status, self-identified LGBTQ+, managers, work location status (remote, hybrid, in-person), and generations.

Small employers are defined as organizations that employ 100-999 employees. Large employers are defined as organizations that employ 1,000+ employees.

Unless otherwise noted, findings are cited throughout in “Top 2 Box” on 4- and 5-point scales (e.g. agree/strongly agree, important/extremely important).

Learn more about our findings, trends, and recommendations across nine years of data at Businessolver.com/empathy



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