The Empathy Trap: Overcoming Leadership Manipulation

by

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Abstract

This study explores how adaptive, cognitive, and dark empathy in supervisors build trust or manipulate employees' emotional responses, job satisfaction, and productivity. Using a cross-sectional survey design via Qualtrics, data was collected from 169 adult employees across diverse industries who reported on their perceptions of their supervisors' empathy and communication style. Findings indicate that adaptive and cognitive empathy are positively associated with emotional response and job satisfaction, whereas dark empathy shows a negative relationship with these outcomes. However, when supervisor communication was included in the models, predictive strength of empathy types shifted. Cognitive empathy and communication quality emerged as the most robust predictors of job satisfaction and emotional response. Adaptive empathy was the only significant predictor of productivity. These results suggest that while empathy is generally advantageous in leadership, its impact is likely mediated by communication style and underlying intent. This study contributes to leadership literature by highlighting both the empowering and manipulative roles of empathy in organizational settings, offering practical implications for leadership development, ethical supervision, and employee well-being.

Keywords: adaptive empathy, cognitive empathy, dark empathy, supervisor communication, job satisfaction, emotional response, workplace productivity

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Introduction

In contemporary organizational settings, the dynamics between leaders and subordinates have become increasingly complex, shaped not only by managerial practices but also by the emotional and psychological strategies embedded within communication. As workplaces evolve with greater emphasis on emotional intelligence, empathy has emerged as a critical leadership trait (Goleman, 2001). However, not all expressions of empathy are inherently constructive. While adaptive and cognitive empathy have been linked to improved morale and job satisfaction, the darker use of empathy, such as strategic emotional manipulation cloaked in care, has gained increasing attention in leadership and organizational research (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016; Nagler et al., 2014).

This thesis examines the spectrum of empathy in leadership communication, focusing on how adaptive, cognitive, and dark empathy influence employees' emotional responses, job satisfaction, and productivity. Special attention is given to the role of supervisor communication style as a potential moderator. Despite the growing body of literature on empathetic leadership, there is limited empirical research that differentiates between authentic empathy and manipulative empathy in the workplace (Breithaupt, 2019). The consequences of misused empathy may include decreased psychological safety, increased burnout, and deteriorating employee engagement.

The present study uses a quantitative approach to examine the relationships among these variables. Drawing on emotional contagion theory and communication accommodation theory, it aims to identify how empathy, as perceived by employees, can either foster workplace satisfaction or fuel feelings of manipulation and dissatisfaction. Given the increased attention to workplace well-being and leadership ethics in the post-pandemic landscape, this research offers timely insight into how empathy functions not just as a soft skill but as a strategic tool, for better or worse.

By investigating these dynamics, this thesis seeks to inform leadership development programs, ethical communication training, and organizational policymaking. Ultimately, it aims to empower organizations and employees to distinguish between empathy that uplifts and empathy that deceives, thereby mitigating manipulation in leadership and restoring genuine connection.

Defining Empathy

Empathy is broadly understood as the ability to comprehend another person's motives through cognitive or affective empathy (Vachon & Lynam, 2015). It can be enhanced through the development of emotional intelligence (EI) and interpersonal dynamics. This thesis explores how leaders utilize empathy across three domains: adaptive, to support and empower others; cognitive, to strategically navigate workplace dynamics; and dark empathy, to manipulate others' reactions (Vachon & Lynam, 2015). The various forms of empathy can be strategically weaponized (either positively or negatively) by leaders as an intellectual tool through cognitive flexibility. Through the mindfulness of leaders, empathy can become a powerful soft skill that enhances job satisfaction.

While empathy is often discussed as a singular concept, research consistently emphasizes that it is not monolithic (Vachon & Lynam, 2015). Instead, empathy consists of multiple dimensions, each with distinct cognitive and emotional mechanisms that influence behavior in different ways. Scholars typically categorize empathy into at least two core forms: cognitive empathy, the capacity to intellectually understand another's thoughts or perspective, and adaptive empathy, the capacity to emotionally resonate with another's feelings (Simon, 2021; Wispé, 1987). In organizational contexts, these distinctions matter significantly, as different expressions of empathy can lead to vastly different outcomes. Expanding on these categories, this study

incorporates a third construct, dark empathy, a more recent conceptualization that recognizes empathy can be used manipulatively to influence or exploit others. This darker side of empathy aligns with traits such as Machiavellianism, which, when paired with positional power, can lead to abusive supervision and toxic leadership behavior (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). Together, these types of empathy create a complex spectrum that shapes how leaders communicate, connect, and ultimately impact the people they lead.

Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive empathy has traditionally been defined as the ability to intellectually recognize and understand another person's emotional state without necessarily sharing in that emotion. However, recent work by Oceia et al. (2009) emphasizes that individual dispositions toward empathy often involve both cognitive awareness and emotional sensitivity, particularly when observing others in distressing situations. In the workplace, a supervisor who exhibits cognitive empathy may recognize signs of employee burnout and respond logically. For example, a supervisor notices an employee's recent drop in productivity and says, *"I can tell you are under a lot of pressure, let us discuss how to reprioritize your workload."* This type of empathy uses perspective-taking to guide professional support without emotional involvement (Holtgraves, 2010).

Adaptive Empathy

Adaptive empathy combines emotional awareness with context-sensitive, prosocial behavior, adjusting to the individual's needs and the situation (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Hu-Chan, 2020). For example, when an employee loses a family member, an empathetic supervisor may

respond, *"Please take whatever time you need. We will handle your duties, and I am here if you need to talk."* This response reflects both emotional attune and supportive behavior, promoting psychological safety and trust (Hu-Chan, 2020).

Dark Empathy

Dark empathy emotionally manipulates with hopes of gaining power or to influence others (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). For instance, a supervisor aware of an employee's personal need for time off and may use it against the employee, saying, "I know times are tough, I'd hate to see someone like you lose their job over taking too much time off, and not staying late (like the rest of us)." This threatens the appeal of the employee's vulnerability of being a team player. This is a form of disguising coercion as a concern, illustrating emotional intelligence with a manipulative tone (Nagler et al., 2014).

Emotional Response

Emotional responses describe the affective reaction employees experience in response to a supervisor's communication or behavior (Fredrickson, 2001; Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). For example, after receiving public praise, an employee may feel proud and motivated. Conversely, after being unfairly criticized in front of peers, they may feel humiliated or resentful, which can impact their morale and performance (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is shaped by interpersonal dynamics, emotional experiences, and perceived fairness in the workplace (Locke, 1976; Judge et al., 2001). For example, a supervisor who

consistently listens, provides constructive feedback, and acknowledges effort contributes positively to job satisfaction. For instance, saying, *"I appreciate how you handled that difficult client; your patience really made a difference,"* reinforces the employee's sense of purpose and value (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In contrast, micromanagement, neglect, or public criticism from a supervisor can erode satisfaction and foster resentment (Judge et al., 2001).

Productivity

Productivity refers to the employee's output or performance quality, typically measured by efficiency, accuracy, or completion of tasks (Campbell et al., 1990). While often treated as a behavioral outcome, it is influenced by emotional responses, empathy dynamics, and communication climate. For example, an employee who feels emotionally supported and respected by their supervisor is more likely to be motivated and efficient. A statement like, *"I know last week was tough, but you pulled through with professionalism, thank you,"* can reinforce intrinsic motivation and enhance productivity (Fredrickson, 2001). Conversely, when employees feel emotionally drained or threatened, such as when a supervisor weaponizes empathy manipulatively (*"I thought you were dedicated, but maybe I was wrong"*), productivity may decline as emotional distress interferes with focus and engagement (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to investigate how employees perceive adaptive, cognitive, and dark empathy in their supervisors and how these perceptions affect their emotional responses, job satisfaction, and self-reported productivity. The study also explores whether a supervisor's communication style moderates these effects. By integrating emotional intelligence theory, empathy research, and scholarship on workplace communication, this study presents a multidimensional framework for understanding leadership behavior.

There is a growing recognition in organizational psychology and leadership communication that empathy is not a universally positive force (Vachon & Lynam, 2015; Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). While adaptive empathy, characterized by support, and compassion can foster trust and psychological safety, dark empathy uses emotional awareness manipulatively for coercion, control, or personal gain (Vachon & Lynam, 2015; Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). Existing studies overall tend to treat empathy as a uniformly prosocial trait, failing to account for its potential misuse in toxic leadership. This study addresses that gap by introducing dark empathy as a measurable construct in the workplace.

The study also responds to workplace trends: rising rates of burnout, turnover, and disengagement often stem from poor leadership and communication breakdowns (Muir et al., 2025). Employees report emotional harm not only from overtly abusive supervisors but also from subtle, emotionally manipulative behaviors, yet these dynamics are under-measured in current research (Vachon & Lynam, 2015; Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). By combining variables such as cognitive empathy, emotional response, and communication style, this research presents a comprehensive model for predicting job satisfaction and productivity. It also equips organizations with clearer indicators to assess leadership effectiveness beyond standard performance metrics.

Findings from this study may be useful for HR professionals, leadership coaches, and scholars designing more ethical and emotionally intelligent work environments. In summary, this research is necessary to capture the full complexity of empathy in leadership, encompassing not only its emotional aspects but also its functional aspects, perception, and impact on those who report to those in power.

Literature Review

The Concept and Complexity of Empathy

According to Breithaupt (2019), empathy is the cognitive and emotional act of projecting oneself into another's experience with greater clarity than they may possess, allowing one to anticipate outcomes by momentarily adopting the other's perspective and interests. It is often considered the appropriate solution to conflict, but sometimes, making a compassionate decision toward an individual or group is contradictory. This creates a complexity where people feel they are being victimized, even though the action is being done for the greater good. Parents often do this with their children, referring to it as *"tough love."* At the time of the action, the children usually feel hurt or angered and tend to act out in rebellious responses as a form of protest. Parents are frequently conflicted with emotions that challenge their ability to practice tough love toward their children. The age and the severity of the situation will dictate how the parents' choices will be, considering this can be applied to a child being a bully, or a child struggling with addictions, or other negative behaviors that need to be corrected. Leaders of organizations are also presented with similar challenges when senior members must correct unwanted behavior from those who report to them. This section examines how empathy presents challenges and can contribute to the difficult choices one must make at various times.

Definitions and Theoretical Foundations

Davis (1983) reconceptualized empathy as a multidimensional construct, measured through the interpersonal reactivity index (IRI), which includes four subscales: perspective-taking (PT), fantasy (FS), empathic concern (EC), and personal distress (PD). Each scale captured cognitive and emotional responses from males and females, with PT associated with social

competence and self-esteem, and PD linked to social dysfunction and low self-esteem. EC and FS reflect emotional sensitivity, with EC tied to altruistic concern and FS to imaginative engagement. The study emphasized that empathy embraces cognitive and affective dimensions, influencing interpersonal behavior and emotional regulation. This framework supports the thesis's focus on adaptive empathy as essential to leadership and identity formation. This suggests that individuals must integrate perspective-taking and psychological synchronization to shift their mindset from employee to supervisor with empathetic leadership.

Empathy is a cognitive function of EI that is vital to subcortical systems in the prefrontal cortex, controlling emotional and social regulation through behavioral reactions, which are demonstrated through the big five personality traits: openness to experience; conscientiousness; extraversion; agreeableness; and neuroticism (Cherniss, et al., 2006). Neural center circuitry underlies social components of EI through cognitive and emotional empathy (Baron-Cohen, 1999). The models support the idea that EI is not static, instead, it is malleable and develops through self-awareness and regulation, facilitated by mindfulness. Both are crucial for individuals navigating identity shifts, overcoming trauma, reframing mindsets from being peers to leadership, without driving a wedge between the relationship, and avoiding the empathetic loop of sympathy (Cherniss, et al., 2006).

Dark Empathy

Vongas and Al Hajj (2015) demonstrate that physiological factors such as testosterone fluctuations following competitive outcomes can influence empathic accuracy and personal distress, especially in individuals driven by a need for dominance or control. This aligns with concerns about dark empathy in leadership because emotionally intelligent individuals could

employ the use of understanding others' emotions not to support, but to manipulate or exploit. This reinforces the importance of examining the biological and psychological underpinnings of power dynamics in organizational settings.

Obedience to authority and moral disengagement, toxic leadership in the workplace, political manipulation, and social compliance provide a foundation for why people follow harmful leadership. Unlike genuine empathy, which fosters connection and psychological safety, dark empathy is weaponized to anticipate vulnerabilities, manage impressions, and steer behaviors in ways that benefit the manipulator. A poor leader may incorporate manipulative traits that feed off the psychological needs of others. Through the roles of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism, toxic leaders may use strategic behavioral methods to maintain power. This can lead to negative outcomes in the long run, and the effects can cause the inter dynamics to fail.

Milgram's (1974) seminal study on obedience to authority illustrates the powerful influence perceived legitimacy can have on individual behavior, even when that behavior contradicts personal moral convictions. Participants in this experiment were willing to administer what they believed were harmful electric shocks to another person simply because an authoritative figure instructed them to do so. This phenomenon highlights the psychological mechanisms of obedience and moral disengagement, wherein individuals shift the responsibility for their actions onto a higher authority, thereby detaching themselves from personal accountability. These dynamics are foundational to perpetuating toxic leadership, as followers may comply with harmful directives not out of agreement but out of deference to authority and a psychological distancing from the consequences of their actions. In organizational and political contexts, such obedience allows toxic leaders to manipulate, exploit, and maintain control, often with the tacit support of those under their influence.

Additionally, studies on emotional intelligence have acknowledged that emotionally perceptive individuals can use their insights for personal gain rather than altruism (Nagler et al., 2014). However, a clear distinction between dark empathy, the intentional, strategic use of emotional understanding to manipulate, and general emotional manipulation remain underdeveloped. While some literature alludes to the darker applications of empathy (Breithaupt, 2019), few empirical studies explicitly isolate dark empathy as a unique construct within leadership communication. Furthermore, much of the existing research centers on the effects of toxic leadership on followers, rather than investigating how leaders strategically use empathy to foster compliance, loyalty, or dependency. This gap calls for a more nuanced investigation into how emotionally intelligent leaders might weaponize empathy as a tool of influence.

Research Gap: Dark Empathy as a Distinct Leadership Construct

While existing literature has thoroughly examined dark traits in leadership, such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and their role in toxic leadership, there is a lack of empirical research that distinguishes dark empathy as a unique and strategic leadership tool. Studies tend to group dark empathy within broader frameworks of manipulative behavior or emotional intelligence, without isolating how emotionally attuned leaders may exploit empathy itself to achieve control, obedience, or loyalty (Breithaupt, 2018; Milgram, 1974; Vachon & Lynam, 2015). Furthermore, most scholarships focus on the presence and impact of these toxic traits on followers. This gap neglects the developmental journey from disempowerment under manipulation to empowered leadership rooted in adaptive empathy. Bridging this gap can inform leadership development, emotional regulation training, and resilience-building strategies for individuals who have experienced psychological manipulation or coercive leadership.

Adaptive Empathy

Adaptive empathy plays a pivotal role in counterbalancing the psychological damage caused by toxic leadership (Milgram, 1974; Taş, 2024). While toxic leaders often exploit emotional cues for manipulation, leaders who exhibit adaptive empathy use their emotional intelligence without compromising ethical standards or organizational goals. Adaptive empathy involves affective synchrony and boundary-setting. Mindful practice requires regulation of emotional responses to maintain clarity and fairness in decision-making. This aligns with employee engagement and organizational commitment to foster trust and a sense of belonging, which are key drivers of motivation and retention. Milgram's (1974) research on obedience to authority highlights the importance of ethical empathy. Followers under toxic leadership conform due to fear, while adaptive empathy fosters voluntary commitment rather than coerced compliance. As Taş (2024) suggests in contemporary research, leaders who model empathy, transparency, and ethical responsibility can recalibrate organizational cultures that have been previously shaped by manipulation and fear.

Research Gap: Adaptive Empathy as a Corrective to Toxic Leadership

Although existing literature has increasingly recognized the importance of empathy in leadership, much of the focus remains on general emotional intelligence or the identification of toxic traits such as narcissism and manipulation (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016; Nagler et al., 2014). There is limited empirical research that isolates adaptive empathy as a distinct leadership capability. This is due to the dual function of interpersonal responsiveness and boundary regulation that are emotionally charged from their environments.

Theories such as Milgram's (1974) obedience to authority and Taş's (2024) work on ethical leadership, highlight dangers of emotional exploitation and the benefits of transparency. Neither fully explore how adaptive empathy may serve as a corrective mechanism within organizational systems previously shaped by toxic leadership. The gap lies in the lack of studies that analyze how adaptive, empathetic, leadership practices restore employees' trust. This can rebuild engagement and shift organizational culture from compliance-based obedience to purpose-driven commitment (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Goleman, 2001; Tortumlu, 2025). By investigating this transformative leadership style, scholars and practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of how individuals who have experienced toxic leadership can evolve into ethical, resilient leaders who embody emotional integrity and promote a sustainable workplace culture.

Empathy as Identity Regulation: A Double-Edged Sword

As individuals adapt their empathy style, they become more capable of transforming cognitive dissonance into affective leadership. This makes emotional intelligence (EI) a key component in the reconstruction and resiliency of adaptive mindsets. Goleman (2001) also explored how EI and intelligence quotient (IQ) are both essential aspects of leadership and are found to be congruent with the intelligence of high achievers. When applied to dark empathy, trauma can affect cognitive functions of the brain. The study acknowledges that there is a mental block that occurs from a traumatic experience, that can render an individual unable to comprehend emotional regulation fully, otherwise known as emotional detachment. This is attributed to the damage that can take place in the prefrontal cortex, which affects the cognitive ability to regulate emotions. When shifting from dark empathic tactics to adaptive empathic tactics, EI can facilitate a shift in the mindset through one's identity in the workplace. This may indirectly cause a feeling

of being emotionally distraught but as they progress in learning adaptive techniques, the individual will become a more effective leader in their role.

Larrabee et al. (2024) highlighted the double-edged nature of empathy, examining how social identity and empathy influence behavior. The study highlighted how empathy can enhance or inhibit prosocial actions, depending on the group dynamics. Specifically, moderate to high levels of empathy increased helping behavior when the recipient belonged to the same social group. In contrast, empathy was less likely to aid out-group members, unless additional social norms of moral responsibility were activated. These findings underscore the dual role of empathy, fostering inclusion and altruism within group boundaries. The study highlighted how empathy, though essential for identity regulation and relational healing, must be cultivated adaptively to avoid reinforcing in-group favoritism and to promote equitable care across social divides.

Research Gap: Adaptive Empathy as a Tool for Inclusive Leadership

While empathy is widely recognized as a key component of EI, and a mechanism for leadership development, inclusivity fosters empathy through EI (Goleman, 2001; Taş, 2024). Although the studies have linked EI to leadership effectiveness and resilience, they seldom explore the multi-dimensional layered structure of adaptive empathy, which can help individuals reconstruct their sense of self in leadership positions.

Larrabee et al. (2024) demonstrated that empathy can foster inclusion and exclusion depending on group identity dynamics. The research overlooked how adaptive empathy can be cultivated as a transcendent identity practice (Breithaupt, 2019). It enables individuals, especially those recovering from marginalization or trauma, to manage their internal emotions and lead in diverse social contexts reasonably with integrity. This leaves a gap in understanding how empathy

functions as a leadership tool and highlights a need for a mechanism of reconstructing the cognitive dissonance, social division, and personal transformation.

Effects of Empathy on Leaders: Identity and Emotional Dissonance

Empathy in leadership presents a dual challenge: maintaining compassion while executing difficult decisions. This tension can lead to identity dissonance, where leaders experience internal psychological conflict between their values and role-based expectations. Vesci et al. (2024) highlighted how negative emotions such as fear can disrupt the cognitive-emotional balance necessary for intentional decision-making. This suggests that emotional conflict may impair a leader's ability to act decisively when empathy clashes with organizational demands. Additionally, empathy may be suppressed or misused without adaptive regulation by undermining leadership's integrity and trust. This study examined how unbalanced empathy impacts leader identity, emotional regulation, and decision-making.

Identity Dissonance: Empathetic Responses to Caring and Not Caring

Leaders often find themselves caught between competing internal scripts: the desire to care for others and the demand to make difficult, sometimes harsh, decisions. This empathic tension generates identity dissonance, a psychological discomfort caused when one's values (e.g., compassion) conflict with leadership actions (e.g., reprimanding, disciplining, or terminating someone). As Vesci et al. (2024) discuss through the affective processing principle, emotions are feedback that shapes judgment and action. When leaders experience fear, regret, or avoidance-related emotions, particularly in high-stakes situations, their self-perception as *"ethical"* or *"caring"* can become destabilized. This emotional-cognitive dissonance affects how leaders

perceive themselves, often leading to identity fragmentation or the development of defensive coping mechanisms.

Such internal conflict is intensified when empathy is misused by manipulative leaders, leaving future ethical leaders uncertain about when and how to care, and for whom (Nagler et al., 2014; Breithaupt, 2019). As Vesci et al. (2024) suggest in the entrepreneurship context, the fear of emotional consequences can deter individuals from fully engaging in decision-making, especially when emotions (such as regret or avoidance) are framed as signals to retreat. Applied to leadership, this suggests that leaders may withdraw from empathic engagement without adaptive emotional regulation or over-identify with *"toughness,"* leading to dehumanized or inconsistent identities.

Research Gap: Emotional-Cognitive Dissonance & Empathy Regulation in Leadership

Vesci et al. (2024) note through the affective processing principle, emotional experiences such as fear, regret, or avoidance can destabilize self-perception and impair judgment. However, little empirical attention has been given to how this emotional-cognitive dissonance uniquely impacts leaders navigating decisions that require compassion and control via empathy suppression, or the use of adaptive vs. dark empathy. Furthermore, the long-term effects of suppressing empathy or over-identifying with emotional detachment remain under-theorized, especially in leaders recovering from or resisting manipulative leadership models. This gap highlights how adaptive emotional regulation can help leaders reconcile empathic values with difficult decisions, preserving psychological integrity.

Emotional Labor: Taxing

Nord et al. (2013) revealed that high participant-to-counselor ratios limit resources significantly, impacting employment outcomes for individuals with cognitive disabilities. This suggests that those in leadership or supportive roles bear the burden of catering to those employees. This labor becomes particularly taxing during crucial decisions such as promotions or terminations, where leaders must balance empathy, organizational needs, and systemic inequities. Promotion may inadvertently reinforce inequity when access to support varies, while firing an employee in a structurally disadvantaged context can create ethical dissonance for leaders attempting to lead with compassion. The strain, compounded by inadequate support, underscores the need for adaptive empathy, enabling leaders to remain grounded while navigating responsibility and justice.

Research Gap: Adaptive Empathy as Emotional Labor in Leadership

While emotional labor has been widely studied in service roles, there is limited research on how adaptive empathy functions as a regulatory mechanism for leaders operating within under-resourced or structurally inequitable systems. Nord et al. (2013) demonstrated that high caseloads and limited resources significantly affect outcomes for support professionals, suggesting similar burdens exist for leaders making emotionally complex decisions. However, little attention has been paid to how taxing emotional labor, especially the strategic use of empathy, affects leadership integrity during moments such as promotions, conflict resolution, or terminations. This strain may be amplified when systemic barriers and organizational expectations pressure leaders to prioritize outcomes over authenticity, blurring the line between adaptive and dark empathy. This gap highlights the importance of investigating how adaptive empathy can mitigate emotional

exhaustion and ethical dissonance, enabling leaders to remain compassionate without compromising organizational effectiveness or integrity.

Motivating Factors of Empathy: Employment Satisfaction and Productivity

Empathetic leadership has emerged as a significant predictor of employee satisfaction and well-being. Tortumlu (2025) found that empathetic leadership has a positive influence on employees' life satisfaction, with job satisfaction serving as a full mediator in this relationship. In office-based work environments, where emotional presence and interpersonal communication are prominent, managers who express understanding and emotional support significantly enhance employees' attitudes toward work. The study revealed that when leaders value employees for their performance, emotional states, and personal challenges, they experience greater job satisfaction, which in turn contributes to broader life satisfaction. This supports the affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), which suggests that emotionally supportive leadership enhances motivation and reduces adverse outcomes, such as stress or burnout. Consequently, empathy in leadership is not only a moral or relational asset but a strategic factor that directly impacts productivity, organizational citizenship, and employee retention.

Research Gap: Empathetic Leadership's Influence on Job Satisfaction and Productivity

While numerous studies confirm that empathetic leadership enhances workplace outcomes, few investigate how empathy affects emotional well-being and organizational productivity. Tortumlu (2025) found that job satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between empathetic leadership and life satisfaction, highlighting how leadership communication and emotional support drive employee engagement. However, a gap remains in understanding how empathetic

communication motivates employee productivity, not just emotional well-being. Existing research often treats job satisfaction as an endpoint, rather than examining its role in promoting discretionary effort, innovation, or improved performance. This study addresses that gap by examining how empathetic leadership and communication behaviors affect satisfaction and self-reported productivity, particularly in environments recovering from manipulative or toxic leadership structures.

Hypotheses

H_1: Perceived adaptive empathy in supervisors will be positively associated with employees' reported levels of job satisfaction.

H_2: Perceived adaptive empathy in supervisors will be positively associated with employees' positive emotional responses toward the supervisor.

H_3: Perceived dark empathy in supervisors will be negatively associated with employees' job satisfaction and positively related to negative emotional responses toward the supervisor.

H_4: Perceived cognitive empathy in supervisors will be positively associated with both job satisfaction and positive emotional responses and will moderate the impact of adaptive or dark empathy on those outcomes.

H_5: Emotional response will mediate the relationship between perceived empathy style (adaptive or dark) and employees' self-reported productivity.

H_6: A supervisor's communication style will moderate the relationship between perceived empathy (adaptive or dark) and employee outcomes (emotional response, job satisfaction, and productivity), such that:

- Supportive communication amplifies the effects of adaptive empathy,
- Dysfunctional communication amplifies the effects of dark empathy.

Methods

Sample

The convenience sample consisted of 169 adult employees (18 years or older) from a range of occupational sectors, including office-based, manual labor, hybrid, and service-oriented positions. Eligibility required current part-time or full-time employment and direct experience working under a supervisor. After excluding incomplete or partial responses, the number of valid cases analyzed ranged from 151 to 162 depending on the variable. Participants reported demographic characteristics information on biological sex, gender identity, age, education level, employment status, years of work experience, age when first supervised, job type, current and highest position held, multiple job status, and veteran status.

Among 151 valid responses, 74.0% reported their biological sex as female and 26.0% as male. In terms of gender identity, 73.4% identified as women (cisgender or transgender), 26.6% as men, 4.5% as transgender, and 2.6% as non-binary or gender non-conforming. The sample was primarily non-veteran (94.8%), with only 5.2% indicating veteran status. Age distribution was as follows: 18–24 (9.7%), 25–34 (29.2%), 35–44 (16.2%), 45–54 (26.0%), and 55+ (18.8%). The majority were between 25 and 54 years old. Educational attainment was diverse, with 37.7% holding a graduate or professional degree, 18.8% holding a high school diploma or GED, and smaller percentages reporting some college (14.3%), an associate's degree (11.0%), or less than a high school diploma (8.4%). Employment status included students (23.4%), unemployed (19.5%), full-time employed (17.5%), self-employed (16.2%), retired (12.3%), part-time employed (3.9%), homemakers (3.2%), and others (3.9%). Most respondents had limited work experience, with 26.0% reporting 1 year and 22.1% reporting 2 years. A smaller group (11.0%) reported 10 or more

years. Most participants were first supervised between the ages of 18 and 30, with ages 25 and 26, most frequently reported.

Procedure

Following IRB approval (see Appendix A), participants were recruited online and completed an anonymous Qualtrics survey after providing informed consent. The survey began with demographic questions, followed by a series of validated and adapted scales measuring perceptions of supervisor empathy, communication style, emotional response, job satisfaction, and productivity. Completion time was estimated at 10–12 minutes, and participation was entirely voluntary. See Appendix B for the complete survey, including all demographic and scale items.

Measures

Independent Variables

Adaptive Empathy. A 10-item, five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = strongly agree) assessed emotionally intelligent and supportive leadership behaviors such as ethical listening and emotional regulation. Items were adapted from Goleman (2001), Davis (1983), and Tortumlu (2025), yielding excellent reliability ($\alpha = .95$, $M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.02$).

Dark Empathy. A 10-item, five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree) captured manipulative uses of empathy in leadership, grounded in the affective and cognitive measure of empathy (Vachon & Lynam, 2015) and literature on exploitative emotional intelligence. Reliability was high ($\alpha = .97$, $M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.30$).

Cognitive Empathy. This 10-item, five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = strongly agree) measured the supervisor's ability to understand and recognize employee emotional states. It was informed by Davis (1983) and Vachon and Lynam (2015), and showed strong internal consistency (α = .94, *M* = 3.25, *SD* = 1.04).

Supervisor Communication Style. A 10-item, five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = strongly agree) evaluated communication behaviors such as clarity, consistency, fairness, and emotional expression. Items were adapted from Goleman (2001), with excellent reliability (α = .94, *M* = 2.13, *SD* = 1.14).

Dependent Variables

Emotional Response Toward Supervisor. A 10-item, five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = strongly agree) based on Hatfield et al.'s (1993) theory of emotional contagion measured emotional reactions such as trust, resentment, or disengagement. Internal reliability was acceptable (α = .76, *M* = 3.76, *SD* = .74).

Job Satisfaction. This 10-item, five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = strongly agree), adapted from Tortumlu (2025), evaluated employee satisfaction in relation to supervisor behavior. The scale had excellent reliability (α = .93, *M* = 3.47, *SD* = 1.07).

Self-Reported Productivity. A 10-item, five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = strongly agree)

assessed participants' perceptions of motivation and performance, adapted from Dai and Hou (2024). Internal consistency was strong ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 4.40$, $SD = .58$).

Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and multiple regression analyses were used to evaluate the hypotheses. The primary focus was on how perceived supervisor empathy styles, adaptive, cognitive, and dark, along with supervisor communication, predict employees' emotional response, job satisfaction, and productivity.

Correlations

The first hypothesis stated that different types of perceived empathy in supervisors -- adaptive, cognitive, and dark -- would be significantly associated with employees' job satisfaction, emotional responses, and productivity. Bivariate correlations were examined. Adaptive empathy was strongly and positively correlated with job satisfaction ($r = .82$, $p < .001$) and emotional response ($r = .76$, $p < .001$). Cognitive empathy was also positively correlated with both job satisfaction ($r = .75$, $p < .001$) and emotional response ($r = .67$, $p < .001$). In contrast, dark empathy showed strong negative correlations with job satisfaction ($r = –.80$, $p < .001$) and emotional response ($r = –.74$, $p < .001$). Emotional response was positively correlated with productivity ($r = .36$, $p = .008$).

Regression Analyses

Job Satisfaction. Hypothesis 1 predicted that perceived adaptive empathy in supervisors would be positively associated with employees' reported levels of job satisfaction. The hypothesis is supported overall, particularly in the base model. An initial multiple regression model including adaptive empathy, cognitive empathy, and dark empathy significantly predicted job satisfaction, F (3, 151) = 165.04, $p < .001$, accounting for 76.6% of the variance ($R^2 = .77$). Adaptive empathy (β = .25, $p = .006$), cognitive empathy (β = .29, $p < .001$), and dark empathy (β = –.42, $p < .001$) were all significant predictors.

When supervisor communication was added to the model, the regression remained significant, F (4, 150) = 140.39, $p < .001$, and explained 78.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .79$). In this expanded model, cognitive empathy (β = .34, $p < .001$) and supervisor communication (β = –.37, $p < .001$) remained significant. Adaptive empathy (β = .16, $p = .077$) and dark empathy (β = –.13, $p = .171$) were no longer statistically significant.

This hypothesis was supported because adaptive empathy significantly predicted higher job satisfaction in the initial model (β = .25, t = 2.78, p = .006). However, when supervisor communication was included, the effect became marginal (β = .16, $p = .077$), suggesting some shared variance.

Adaptive empathy demonstrated a strong, positive with job satisfaction ($r = .83$, $p < .001$).

To determine which type of empathy best predicts employee job satisfaction, a multiple regression analysis was conducted including cognitive empathy, adaptive empathy, and dark empathy as predictors of job satisfaction. The overall model was statistically significant and accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in job satisfaction.

Results showed that cognitive empathy was a significant positive predictor of job satisfaction ($\beta = .29$, $t = 3.98$, $p < .001$), indicating that employees who perceived their supervisors as more cognitively empathetic reported higher levels of satisfaction. Adaptive empathy also positively predicted job satisfaction, $\beta = .25$, $t = 2.78$, $p = .006$, suggesting that emotionally supportive leadership enhances satisfaction outcomes. In contrast, dark empathy was a significant negative predictor, $\beta = –.42$, $t = –6.69$, $p < .001$, revealing that when employees perceive their supervisors as manipulative or emotionally exploitative, their job satisfaction markedly decreases. The overall regression model was statistically robust, explaining 77% of the variance in job satisfaction ($R^2 = .77$). Notably, the negative regression coefficient for dark empathy ($\beta = –.42$) indicates that it is harmful to employee satisfaction, with the strongest overall impact among the predictors. In contrast, cognitive ($\beta = .29$) and adaptive empathy ($\beta = .25$) positively contributed to job satisfaction, demonstrating that emotionally attuned and supportive leadership fosters a more satisfied workforce. In summary, both cognitive and adaptive empathy significantly predicted higher job satisfaction, while dark empathy emerged as a strong negative predictor.

Emotional Response. Hypothesis 2 predicted that perceived adaptive empathy in supervisors would be positively associated with employees' emotional responses toward the supervisor. A multiple regression analysis was conducted with adaptive empathy, cognitive empathy, and dark empathy as predictors of emotional response. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(3, 150) = 92.17$, $p < .001$, and explained 64.8% of the variance in emotional response ($R^2 = .65$).

All three predictors were significant. Adaptive empathy was a significant positive predictor, $\beta = .26$, $t = 2.31$, $p = .022$, indicating that supervisors who express warmth and care evoke stronger emotional responsiveness in employees. Cognitive empathy also significantly predicted emotional response, $\beta = .22$, $t = 2.46$, $p = .015$, suggesting that a leader's ability to understand others enhances emotional connection. Dark empathy, however, was a strong negative predictor, $\beta = -.39$, $t = -5.01$, $p < .001$, meaning that when supervisors use empathy manipulatively, employees are more likely to emotionally withdraw or disengage. Beta weights indicate that dark empathy had the most substantial influence, followed by adaptive and then cognitive empathy.

A second regression model included supervisor communication as an additional predictor. This model was also statistically significant ($\boldsymbol{F}(4, 149) = 81.12$, $p < .001$) and explained 68.5% of the variance in emotional response ($R^2 = .69$). In this model, cognitive empathy ($\beta = .28$, $p = .002$) and supervisor communication ($\beta = -.47$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors. However, adaptive empathy ($\beta = .12$, $p = .28$) and dark empathy ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .72$) were no longer significant, suggesting that when accounting for communication style, the impact of empathy alone becomes

less influential. These results imply that supervisor communication may moderate or mediate the effect of empathy on emotional response.

Job Satisfaction and Emotional Response. Hypothesis 3 predicted that perceived dark empathy in supervisors would be negatively associated with employees' job satisfaction and positively related to negative emotional responses. This hypothesis was supported.

Bivariate correlations showed that dark empathy was strongly negatively correlated with both job satisfaction ($r = –.80$, $p < .001$) and emotional response ($r = –.74$, $p < .001$).

In the initial regression models $F (3, 151) = 165.04$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .766, dark empathy significantly predicted both job satisfaction ($\beta = –.42$, $p < .001$) and $F (3, 150) = 92.17$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .648 emotional response ($\beta = –.39$, $p < .001$), indicating that employees who perceived their supervisors as manipulative and emotionally exploitative reported significantly lower satisfaction and emotional engagement. However, when supervisor communication was added to the model, the effect of dark empathy became non-significant for both job satisfaction ($\beta = –.13$, $p = .171$) and emotional response ($\beta = –.04$, $p = .721$). This change suggests that supervisor communication may act as a moderating or masking variable, potentially buffering the negative impact of dark empathy on employee outcomes.

Productivity. Hypothesis 4 predicted that perceived cognitive empathy in supervisors would be positively associated with both job satisfaction and emotional response and would moderate the effects of adaptive or dark empathy; this hypothesis was partially supported.

To explore predictors of employee productivity, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with emotional response, adaptive empathy, cognitive empathy, and dark empathy as predictors. The model was statistically significant, $F(4, 145) = 4.94$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 12.0% of the variance in productivity ($R^2 = .12$). Emotional response was a significant positive predictor of productivity ($\beta = .36$, $t = 2.71$, $p = .008$), indicating that employees who felt more emotionally engaged by their supervisors reported greater productivity. Adaptive empathy also significantly predicted productivity ($\beta = .38$, $t = 2.04$, $p = .043$), suggesting that supportive and flexible leadership behaviors improve performance outcomes. Interestingly, dark empathy emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .31$, $t = 2.24$, $p = .026$), implying that emotionally manipulative leadership may temporarily drive productivity, possibly through pressure, fear, or coercion. Cognitive empathy did not significantly predict productivity ($\beta = –.19$, $p = .215$).

A second model that included supervisor communication remained statistically significant, $F(4, 146) = 3.29$, $p = .013$, but accounted for less variance ($R^2 = .08$). In this model, only adaptive empathy remained a significant predictor ($\beta = .376$, $p = .048$), while supervisor communication ($\beta = –.26$, $p = .180$), cognitive empathy ($\beta = –.07$, $p = .631$), and dark empathy ($\beta = .34$, $p = .088$) were not statistically significant. These findings suggest that while emotional manipulation may influence short-term productivity, it is not a consistent or sustainable predictor when communication dynamics are considered.

Emotional Response. A multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the extent to which adaptive empathy, cognitive empathy, and dark empathy predicted employees' emotional response toward their supervisors. The model was statistically significant, $F(3, 150) = 92.17$, $p < .001$, with an $R^2 = .648$, indicating that approximately 64.8% of the variance in emotional response was explained by the three types of empathy. In this model, adaptive empathy ($\beta = .26$, $p = .022$), cognitive empathy ($\beta = .22$, $p = .015$), and dark empathy ($\beta = –.39$, $p < .001$) all significantly predicted emotional response.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that emotional response would mediate the relationship between empathy and productivity. Although emotional response ($\beta = .36$, $p = .008$), adaptive empathy ($\beta = .38$, $p = .043$), and dark empathy ($\beta = .31$, $p = .026$) significantly predicted productivity, this hypothesis was not supported because mediation was not formally tested. The overall regression model predicting productivity was also statistically significant, $F(4, 145) = 4.94$, $p < .001$, but the explained variance was modest ($R^2 = .12$). Due to insufficient sample size, a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro was not conducted. Power analysis indicated that an additional 100 participants would have been needed to adequately test this mediation pathway.

The model was statistically significant, $F(4, 149) = 81.12$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 69% of the variance in emotional response ($R^2 = .69$, Adjusted $R^2 = .68$). The overall correlation between the predictors and emotional response was strong ($R = .83$), and the standard error of the estimate was low ($SE = .42$), indicating a strong model fit.

Among the predictors, supervisor communication was the strongest and most significant contributor to emotional response, $\beta = –.47$, $t = –4.19$, $p < .001$. Notably, the negative direction of this relationship was unexpected, suggesting that as supervisor communication increases, emotional responsiveness may decrease. This result could reflect the influence of certain negative

communication styles, such as micromanagement, excessive monitoring, or critical feedback, which may emotionally disengage employees. Cognitive empathy also emerged as a significant positive predictor, $\beta = .28$, $t = 3.23$, $p = .002$, indicating that when supervisors demonstrate thoughtful understanding of employees' perspectives, it enhances emotional engagement.

In contrast, adaptive empathy ($\beta = .12$, $t = 1.09$, $p = .279$) and dark empathy ($\beta = –.04$, $t = –0.36$, $p = .721$) were not significant predictors in this model. These findings suggest that their effects may be diminished or absorbed when stronger variables like cognitive empathy and communication style are considered. This regression model examined only the direct effects of empathy and communication on productivity; it did not include emotional response as a mediator variable, nor did it assess indirect effects, and therefore does not constitute a formal test of mediation.

Supportive and Dysfunctional Communication. The final hypothesis predicted that supervisor communication style would moderate the relationship between perceived empathy (adaptive or dark) and employee outcomes, specifically emotional response, job satisfaction, and productivity. It was expected that supportive communication would amplify the effects of adaptive empathy, while dysfunctional communication would intensify the effects of dark empathy.

Although the hypothesis was theoretically grounded, formal moderation testing was not conducted, and therefore, the hypothesis remains suggestive but untested. Results from the multiple regression analysis predicting emotional response were statistically significant, $F(4, 149) = 81.12$, $p < .001$, with an $R^2 = .685$, indicating that supervisor communication and empathy together explained 68.5% of the variance in emotional response. In this model, supervisor communication emerged as a significant negative predictor ($\beta = –.47$, $p < .001$).

Similarly, the regression model predicting job satisfaction was significant, $F(4, 150) = 140.39$, $p < .001$, with an $R^2 = .789$. Here, supervisor communication also significantly predicted job satisfaction ($\beta = -.37$, $p < .001$), suggesting that communication perceived as excessive, unclear, or dysfunctional may diminish employees' emotional and satisfaction outcomes.

Notably, the inclusion of supervisor communication in the models attenuated the predictive strength of both adaptive and dark empathy, suggesting potential interaction effects or overlapping variance. However, because no interaction terms were included in the models and no formal moderation analysis (e.g., PROCESS macro) was conducted, the hypothesis cannot be confirmed. Future research should test this proposed moderation by including interaction terms and conducting conditional process analysis to determine whether communication style strengthens or weakens the influence of different empathy styles on workplace outcomes.

Discussion

The present study examined how supervisor communication, adaptive empathy, cognitive empathy, and dark empathy predict employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, emotional response, and productivity. Drawing from theories of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2001), empathy typologies (Breithaupt, 2018), and communication competence (Wiemann, 1977), this research provides insight into the psychological and communicative dynamics between leadership and subordinate performance in the workplace. The findings revealed strong support for most empathy forms and communication styles in shaping employee perceptions.

Interpretation of Findings

Cognitive empathy consistently emerged as a strong and significant predictor of both job satisfaction and emotion, even when controlling other variables. This finding aligns the response with existing literature suggesting that the ability to understand others' perspectives logically and respond with situational awareness is a vital leadership trait (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Adaptive empathy was also significantly associated with job satisfaction and emotional response in initial models, though its effect was attenuated when supervisor communication was added. This suggests that while emotionally supportive behaviors matter, they may overlap conceptually or behaviorally with how supervisors communicate more generally.

Dark empathy, defined as the strategic use of emotional understanding to manipulate, was strongly negatively correlated with both job satisfaction and emotional response in direct models, supporting the hypothesis that manipulative leadership damages employee well-being. However, these effects diminished when supervisor communication was introduced, indicating that poor

communication may either be a manifestation of dark empathy or act as a more immediate predictor of adverse outcomes.

The findings of supervisor communication call for deeper analysis of tone, intent, and delivery of empathy style. By understanding the delivery styles of supervisory communication, leaders can begin to make necessary corrections to how they pass the word down to their employees. This could be simply the tone of the emails that are sent, which artificial intelligence (AI) now has an added advantage for setting appropriate professional tonality in written text. Adjusting their intent to putting themselves into the shoes of their employee's situation, including the position the employee is in their personal life. Using adaptive empathy allows the leaders to grow their trust in the employees, and in return the supervisor will grow trust within their team.

The weakest model predicted productivity, explaining only 8.3% of the variance. Among the predictors, only adaptive empathy was a significant positive contributor. This limited explanatory power suggests that productivity is likely influenced by a broader set of contextual, task-specific, or organizational factors beyond interpersonal dynamics alone.

Comparison with Prior Research

The results align with and expand upon existing research in leadership and organizational communication. Consistent with prior work on cognitive empathy, supervisors who demonstrated perspective-taking and thoughtful responsiveness significantly enhanced employee job satisfaction (Decety & Jackson, 2004). This supports the growing consensus that cognitive empathy, more than emotional overidentification, is key to effective leadership in professional settings where objectivity and fairness are valued.

While adaptive empathy was a strong standalone predictor in simpler models, its effects weakened when supervisor communication was added, suggesting that empathy may only be effective when paired with constructive communication practices. Interestingly, dark empathy, though not significant in regression models, showed strong bivariate correlations with negative employee outcomes. This aligns with recent studies identifying "dark side" leadership traits (e.g., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) that utilize empathy manipulatively to control others (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). The findings reinforce warnings that emotionally intelligent manipulation, while subtle, can be deeply harmful to the workplace climate if left unchecked.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-report data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or recall inaccuracies. Second, although correlation and regression analyses revealed significant relationships, causal inferences cannot be made due to the cross-sectional design. Third, the potential moderating and mediating effects hypothesized in H_4 through H_6 were suggested by patterns in the data but were not formally tested using interaction terms or conditional process models (e.g., PROCESS or structural equation modeling). This was largely due to limitations in sample size, which restricted the statistical power necessary to test complex moderation and mediation models with confidence. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data limited the ability to assess how empathy and communication evolve over time, which may influence the stability and direction of observed relationships. Future research using larger samples and longitudinal or experimental designs is recommended to better assess causal mechanisms and test more complex theoretical models.

Future Research

Future studies should formally test the interaction and mediation effects proposed in this study using tools such as hierarchical regression or more advanced statistical model tests. Examining whether and how communication styles moderate the influence of empathy types, particularly adaptive and dark empathy, could offer a more nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics. These relationships were suggested in the current data but could not be formally tested due to limitations in sample size and statistical power.

Given that the current study relied on a cross-sectional design, future research would also benefit from a longitudinal approach to track how emotional responses and job satisfaction change over time, especially during leadership transitions or organizational stress. Such temporal data would enhance understanding of the sustainability of empathy-driven leadership outcomes. Additional exploration of contextual variables, such as organizational culture, job role, industry sector, or team composition, may help explain the modest predictive power of empathy and communication for productivity. Investigating whether these variables amplify or diminish the effects of leadership behaviors would allow for more tailored organizational interventions.

Furthermore, qualitative studies could add depth to the quantitative findings by capturing employees lived experiences and interpretations of supervisor empathy and communication. Through interviews or open-ended responses, researchers could uncover nuances and emotional insights that are not easily quantified, such as perceived authenticity, tone, or psychological safety.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of research on emotionally intelligent leadership by emphasizing that empathy is not inherently positive or negative as a tool shaped by context, intent, and communication. Future work should continue to refine our understanding of

when empathy empowers and when it manipulates, ensuring that leadership development efforts promote ethical, effective, and emotionally attuned practices.

Conclusion

The present study examined how distinct forms of empathy, adaptive, cognitive, and dark, interact with supervisor communication styles to impact employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, emotional responses, and productivity. Findings revealed that cognitive empathy consistently and positively predicted both job satisfaction and emotional response, underscoring the importance of thoughtful, perspective-taking leadership. Adaptive empathy also contributed positively to outcomes, but its significance decreased when accounting for supervisor communication, suggesting a potential overlap between emotionally supportive behaviors and communication quality. Dark empathy, while initially detrimental to satisfaction and emotional response, was neutralized in models that included communication, suggesting that manipulative leadership behaviors may be obscured or moderated by the way supervisors engage interpersonally.

Supervisor communication emerged as a critical, albeit paradoxical, factor. While it played a strong role in predicting emotional responses and job satisfaction, the direction of the association was negative, suggesting that certain forms of communication, such as overbearing or critical interactions, may unintentionally suppress employee engagement. This finding prompts a closer examination of not just the presence but the *tone, intent*, and *style* of supervisor communication.

While the study robustly explained employee satisfaction and emotional response, its ability to account for productivity was limited. Adaptive empathy was the only predictor to significantly influence productivity, highlighting its potential as a motivator for performance, but

also reinforcing the need for future research to examine structural, contextual, and motivational variables beyond interpersonal dynamics.

Taken together, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of empathy as both a leadership asset and a potential liability. When used ethically and cognitively, empathy can be a catalyst for employee well-being and satisfaction. When weaponized or combined with poor communication practices, it may backfire, fostering disconnection, dissatisfaction, and disengagement.

This study provides practical recommendations for leadership development, including investing in empathy training (particularly cognitive and adaptive empathy), scrutinizing and refining communication styles, and screening for manipulative leadership traits that may be disguised as emotional intelligence. While empathy is often hailed as an inherent good in leadership discourse, this research emphasizes the importance of intentionality, boundaries, and ethical use. As workplaces evolve in complexity, so too must our understanding of the emotional dynamics that define them. Moving forward, organizations that aim to foster inclusive, psychologically safe, and productive cultures must prioritize emotionally intelligent leadership, not just in sentiment, but in practice as well.

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Appendix A.

Jun 17, 2025, 10:54:47 AM EDT

Rebecca Curnalia
Communication

Re: Exempt - Initial - 2025-287 The Empathy Trap: Overcoming Leadership Manipulation

Dear Dr. Rebecca Curnalia:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for The Empathy Trap: Overcoming Leadership Manipulation

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

Findings: The researcher is conducting a quantitative survey study to explore how supervisors use different forms of empathy—**adaptive**, **cognitive**, and **dark empathy**—in the workplace, and how these communication styles impact employees' emotional responses, job satisfaction, and productivity. Participants must be 18 years or older and currently or previously employed under a supervisor. The survey is anonymous, takes approximately 10–12 minutes to complete, and is administered online. No identifying information is being collected. This meets the criteria of an exempt study, category 2i.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board

Appendix B.

Consent Form

Dear Participant:

I am collecting data for CMST.6996 Thesis 2 in the Department of Communication at Youngstown State University. The purpose of this study is to understand how adaptive and dark empathy is used by supervisors to manipulate employees, and to understand the emotional responses employees have from the various communication styles.

This study will ask you about Adaptive Empathy, Cognitive Empathy, Dark Empathy, Supervisor Communication Styles, Your Emotional Response, Job Satisfaction, Productivity, and Demographic questions.

You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

Completing this study should take about 10-12 minutes.

Your privacy is important, and we will handle all information collected from you in a confidential manner. We will not record any identifying information about you and your responses will be anonymous.

We plan to present the results at conferences and through publications, but we will not reveal the identity of our research participants in any of our reports.

We do not anticipate any benefit, harm, or emotional discomfort for our research participants. We expect that these findings will help us understand how empathetic leadership communication influences job satisfaction and productivity.

You do not have to be in this study. If you don't want to, you can say "no" without losing any benefits that you are entitled to. If you do agree, you can stop participating at any time. If you wish to withdraw, please exit the survey.

If you have questions about this research project please contact Dr. Rebecca Curnalia, professor in the Department of Communication at Youngstown State: rmcurnalia@ysu.edu or 330-475-9295.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact the Office of Research at YSU (330-941-2377) or at YSUIRB@ysu.edu

Survey Questions and Codes

Response Scale for All Multiple-Choice Questions:

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Somewhat disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Somewhat agree

5 = Strongly agree

Response Scale for Yes or No Questions:

1 = Yes

2 = No

By responding "yes," you are:

- Agreeing to participate in this study.
- Confirming that you are 18 years of age or older.
- Are currently or previously employed and were required to report to a supervisor.

Adaptive Empathy Scale

AE1. My boss listens and cares when I'm going through a hard time.

AE2. I feel like my boss supports me when things are tough.

AE3. My boss is happy when the team or I do something good.

AE4. When people are stressed, my boss stays calm and kind.

AE5. My boss tries to keep the team in a good mood when things get hard.

AE6. My boss asks how I'm doing and really cares about the answer.

AE7. When I mess up, my boss helps without making me feel bad.

AE8. I can be myself around my boss without feeling judged.

AE9. My boss checks in with me in a respectful way.

AE10. My boss talks kindly when we have emotional conversations.

Cognitive Empathy Scale

CE1. My boss can tell something's wrong even if I don't say it.

CE2. My boss notices when someone's having a bad day.

CE3. My boss understands how group drama affects the team.

CE4. My boss changes how they talk based on how people feel.

CE5. My boss sees problems coming before they blow up.

CE6. My boss can read body language in meetings.

CE7. My boss knows when to give me space or help.

CE8. I've seen my boss calm people down just by noticing how they feel.

CE9. My boss gives advice in a way that fits who I am.

CE10. My boss understands people's feelings without needing to ask.

Dark Empathy Scale

DE1. My boss shares personal stuff to seem nice but then uses it to control people.

DE2. I've seen my boss pretend to care just to get someone to do something.

DE3. My boss makes people feel guilty to get extra work from them.

DE4. My boss acts nice unless you say no—then they get mean in sneaky ways.

DE5. My boss brings up stuff you shared in private to make you look bad.

DE6. My boss only acts like they care when it helps them.

DE7. My boss uses people's emotional stories to get their way.

DE8. My boss remembers what you say and uses it to push you later.

DE9. If you open up, my boss might use it against you in your review.

DE10. My boss fakes empathy to look good, not to help people.

Supervisor's Communication Style Scale

SC1. My boss acts passive-aggressive instead of talking things out directly.

SC2. My supervisor gives compliments only to favorites, not fairly to everyone.

SC3. When I need time off for family, my boss makes me feel guilty about it.

SE4. My supervisor uses PTO or sick days as leverage to control decisions.

SE5. My boss avoids conversations but finds out everything through others.

SE6. My boss flips out or yells when things go wrong.

SE7. My supervisor cusses and talks rough during work like it's normal.

SE8. When someone asks for time off, my boss says 'figure it out' or ignores it.

SE9. My boss acts like we're replaceable and talks down to us.

SE10. My boss disappears during the day but watches us through cameras or others.

Emotional Response Toward Supervisor Scale

NOTE: When answering the following questions, please refer to the same supervisor you were thinking of for each question.

ER1. I cuss my boss out in my head or flip them off when they can't see me.

ER2. I complain about my boss to my coworkers almost every day.

ER3. Sometimes I feel like hitting my boss, but I don't because I need my job.

ER4. I go above and beyond at work because my boss treats me with respect.

ER5. My boss understands me, and we work well together.

ER6. I usually get along with bosses, but there's one I just can't stand.

ER7. There's only one boss I've liked because they made me feel seen and respected.

ER8. I only do what I have to at work because my boss doesn't treat us well.

ER9. I would help my boss with anything because they're a good person.

ER10. When my boss talks, I feel small or unimportant no matter what I do.

Job Satisfaction Scale

JS1. I feel emotionally drained because of how my boss handles things.

JS2. I feel valued as a person in my workplace.

JS3. I enjoy going to work most days.

JS4. I feel stuck in my current job situation.

JS5. I'm satisfied with how my supervisor supports my growth.

JS6. I often think about quitting because of how management treats people.

JS7. My job brings me a sense of purpose or fulfillment.

JS8. I feel like leadership decisions make my work harder than it needs to be.

JS9. I get credit when I do something well at work.

JS10. I feel respected by my supervisor in how they communicate with me.

Self-Reported Productivity Scale

PS1. I consistently complete all my assigned work tasks on time.

PS2. I often go above and beyond my job responsibilities.

PS3. I find ways to be productive even when faced with workplace challenges.

PS4. I take initiative to improve processes or solve problems at work.

PS5. I perform to the best of my ability during my workday.

PS6. I stay focused and efficient throughout most of my workday.

PS7. I willingly take on additional tasks when needed.

PS8. I maintain high productivity even when my workload increases.

PS9. I make an effort to exceed expectations in my role.

PS10. I remain productive even when I'm not closely supervised.

Demographic Questions Scale

D1. What is your age?

D2. What is your biological sex?

D3. Do you identify as transgender or non-binary at work?

D4. What type of work do you currently do?

D5. How many years have you worked at your current job?

D6. Highest Level of Education completed?

D7. Current Position at Work

D8. Highest Position Ever Held

D9. Do you currently do multiple jobs?

D10. Would you be open to a follow-up interview?

Note: If yes, participants will be directed to a separate contact form; if no:

Thank you for your willingness to support this study.