

Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

A STORY ABOUT EMPATHY



Monday, 6:40 a.m. Three sick calls, one of them for the third time in four weeks. I see the messages flash up one after the other on my phone and feel my neck tense up before I even enter the hall.

Outside, the air is cold and clear. Inside, it's warm, loud, and smells of oil and metal. The contrast is like a divide between two worlds. I push open the door and am greeted by the soundscape that usually grounds me—today it sounds more like a constant alarm.

The locker room is unusually quiet. Normally, it's filled with banter, playful teasing, and the team warming up. Today, there's only the rustling of jackets and the tired hiss of the coffee machine.

Miriam is standing by the locker, tying her shoes. When I come in, she looks up. Her eyes are red, not from cold.

"Florian, I can't stay any longer today," she says, even before she's properly greeted everyone. "The little one is home with a fever again. My sister can't come until the afternoon."

I nod automatically. Leadership reflex. Solution-seeking. Layers. Heads. Lines. And at the same time, I notice a second thought rising within me: And who will hold the line then?

I swallow it down. Not because it's wrong, but because I sense that it shouldn't be the first sentence right now.

"Okay," I say calmly. "We'll manage. Tell me again later when you really have to leave."

She nods gratefully, but still looks as if she's said it too many times already.

The morning is a constant reshuffling. Again. I'm jumping between stations, helping out, picking up the slack, organizing replacements wherever needed. I know how to salvage days like these. I know every move, every area by heart. I'm faster than the plan. But I also realize: the more skillfully I operate, the less room there is to see the bigger picture.

Shortly before the first break, I see Tobias sitting alone at a table. This strikes me because he's usually right in the middle of the hustle and bustle, surrounded by the others like a planetary system. Today, he's a solitary dot.

I get myself a coffee and sit down next to him. "How are you?" I ask.

"Go," he says. The tone is flat, like a worn-down tool. No anger, no defensiveness. More like weariness.

I let the silence stand. For me, that's the most difficult part of leadership: not filling it immediately.

"I notice that many people are at their limit right now," I say after a moment. "And I wonder if we are only fighting symptoms at this point."

He looks at me, surprised. As if he hadn't expected me to call it that. Then the words slip out, as if someone had lifted a lid.

"Honestly? I'm empty," he says quietly. "Someone's missing every week. We push ourselves through until we can't anymore. And then they tell us we're supposed to be resilient." He makes air quotes. "I don't feel seen."

This affects me. Not because it's unfair, but because it's true.

Over the past few weeks, I've mainly been organizing: shifts, numbers, replacements. People only came after the gaps were filled. I thought I was there for the team because I was functioning. And in doing that, I overlooked the fact that functioning isn't the same as being seen.

"Thank you for saying that," I say. My voice has dropped. "What do you need right now?" He shrugs, looks at his hands. "I don't know. Just to not function for once. And... that you said it. That this is really tough right now."

There it is again, that unassuming truth: Sometimes people don't need a plan. They first need the recognition of reality.

I remember the coach's statement from a team workshop two months ago. At the time, I didn't really want to hear it: "Empathy isn't about making problems go away. Empathy is about looking at them together."

Now this sentence sits in my hand like a stone. Heavy. Useful.

"Okay," I say slowly. "Then let's look at it together."

In the afternoon, I bring the line to a brief halt. Not for long, but noticeably. I call the team into the small meeting area between the halls. No PowerPoint, no motivational slogans, no "You're the best" statements. Just us.

"I see that the sickness rate is currently devouring us," I begin. "And I see that we are starting to lose each other. This isn't just your problem. It's ours."

A few glances go up. Skepticism. Hope. Weariness. I sense how accustomed they've become to the fact that hardship is simply the price to pay.

"Today we're going to clarify two things," I say. "First, how we can provide fair relief in the short term – without resorting to heroics. Second, what we need to change so that this doesn't become our new normal. I want everyone to say where things are getting too much."

Silence. Then a single nod. Then a breath. And finally, the words come.

Sven: "We're just jumping around all the time. There's no rhythm anymore." Jule: "When I take a break, I feel guilty." Miriam: "I'm afraid I'll be seen as unreliable if I go for my child." Marco: "We keep getting higher and higher goals, but not a word about how that's realistic." Tobias: "I feel like we're just supposed to quietly push through."

I listen. Not to reply, but to understand. I ask questions without defending. I endure the tension when they talk about "those in power." I notice how simply speaking the words changes the space. Guilt gives way to reality. Isolation gives way to a sense of teamwork.

After twenty minutes I say: "Thank you. I understand. We'll do three things now."

Rotation for demanding stations. No single person carries the toughest section permanently. Break anchors. Fixed times that are non-negotiable. I protect them. Escalation upwards with numbers and votes. I will represent this burden not just as a quota, but as a reality.

It's no miracle. It's a first step. But I see their faces soften. Not happy. More like... re-engaged.

As we part ways, Tobias pauses briefly. "It was good that you said so," he murmurs. I nod. "It was good that you said so beforehand."

Later, when I'm writing the rotation schedule, I realize: Empathy didn't lower the sickness rate today. It didn't conjure people out of thin air. But it did make the team a team again. And that's the prerequisite for anything to improve.

Empathy is not a soft thing. Empathy is an act of leadership.

Takeaway inspiration

Empathy

Empathy in leadership means perceiving and taking seriously the reality and feelings of others without immediately judging or trying to fix them. It creates connection because people feel: "I am seen" – and this is precisely where trust and the ability to act together grow.

Before you tackle the next problem, say openly, "I see how stressful this is for you right now." Let that sentence hang in the air for a moment. Often, this brings more relief than your quickest action.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT EMPATHY FOR YOU

1. Where am I currently organizing things without consulting people?
2. What truth or feeling am I avoiding if I just "function"?
3. How can I make stress visible this week without immediately solving it?



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