

## The Empathy Gap and the Presumption of Guilt



**T**he Social Security Administration is beleaguered with a serious empathy gap: the inability to properly estimate how an employee's individual mental and emotional set of circumstances can impact the quality of their customary contributions to their respective offices. In turn, this empathy gap alienates bargaining unit employees from the nobility of the work they perform. This empathy gap has serious consequences as employees become more disenchanted with management, feeling more devalued and sometimes even dehumanized, what began as a labor of love becomes a challenging and arduous struggle to just get through the day. It puts employees in a

constant survival mode which inevitably distracts from the goals and expectation of the employee. A cognitive dissonance exists and begins with a lack of training for management in interpersonal skills, relationship building, and the utilization of interdependence—as a result produces ineffective leaders. An argument can be made for a strong correlation and perhaps causation in the pervasive empathy gap bias that metastasizes into a perceived mentality of “us against them” that leaves employees disaffected and dispirited in an environment that has a monopoly on their time, as each employee including travel can devote majority of their awake hours to their chosen vocation. Often management underestimates the impact of their not demonstrating sensitivity towards an employee’s circumstances that often have monumental effects on the mental, emotional, and sometimes financial aspect of an employee’s life. This is further exacerbated when these actions are compounded tacitly exposing management as insensitive to the employee’s needs.

Much can be attributed to an acculturated belief that as a federal agency, there must be austere rigid conformity combined with apathy in order to perpetuate a federal bureaucracy. The dissonances in predicating impassiveness as the foundation of conditions of employment when we are all human is self-defeating and ultimately impracticable in the realization of federal efficiency. It must be recognized by management that as human capital, we require a significant, yet individualized compassionate kind of maintenance as the edifices we work in

and the computers that we use require their own kind of maintenance. Buildings need the heating and water pipes, electrical wires, bathrooms, etc. maintained constantly so that optimal performance is consistent and appropriately anticipated. Computer systems need to be protected from viruses, malware, phishing, and other compromising maladies that may afflict the agency's systems. Because human beings are different from material capital, they require a different kind of maintenance, but no less important to the efficacy of optimal outcomes.

Only when management makes a concerted effort to understand the life circumstances creates a visceral impact that exists in each of us in myriad manifestations and displaying a sense of empathy and understanding are crucial to maintaining a healthy and vibrant workforce. It becomes too much of a contradiction when an agency established on the egalitarian principles of protecting and providing for the welfare of the most vulnerable of the American population while paradoxically at the same time being tone deaf to the emotional and mental duress that SSA frontline employees feel for a multitude of reasons including the overwhelming burden of consistently exposing themselves to the most heart-wrenching declarations of despair in search of benefits; narratives that press upon their own sense of empathy when dealing with the public incessantly. Much like a doctor, frontline SSA employees need to find ways to disassociate themselves from the constant bombardment of human despair considering the average human only has a finite

capacity for despair and when compounded by the perceived need to be in constant survival mode with management, it becomes untenable and inevitable that employees are alienated from their jobs.

Because of the nature of the duties of a frontline SSA employee, it is inherently self-rewarding and provides a sense of pride that is rivaled by very few vocations. With just the slightest of maintenance in the form of empathy and compassion for the employees can go a long way to preserving the reverence employees have for their accepted mission. Benjamin Franklin once said “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Let’s avoid the fire instead of having to put it out. Recognizing employees have circumstances that take a toll on their well-being is an important beginning. It is also important to understand that receiving empathy and compassion from management sends the message that management values the employees and has its best interests well-balanced with the needs of the public. Reducing the empathy gap requires no additional funding to the budget, only a willingness on the part of management to embrace the humanity in all of us and understanding the correlation of a happy employee and a productive employee.