



KEY LEADERS' SUMMIT 2026:

TRANSFORMING BEHAVIOR THROUGH CONNECTION

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KEYNOTE SPEAKER:
JEFF HOLGUIN, PH.D.



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LEADERSHIP

Empathy Under Pressure Leading Under Cognitive Load

The science of overload, the ACT model, and six daily leadership commitments.

Jeff Holguin, Ph.D.

The Rising Psychological Load

We are cognitively underwater —
and empathy pays the price.



74%

Employees report feeling overwhelmed at work

APA Work & Well-Being Survey



2.5×

Decision fatigue multiplier under chronic stress

Baumeister et al. — Ego Depletion Research



40%

Drop in prosocial behavior under high cognitive load

Hodges & Myers — Social Psychology of Empathy



\$1 Trillion

Annual global productivity loss from burnout

World Health Organization, 2019

Key context: These are not independent data points; they form a cascade. Overload depletes regulation, regulation depletion erodes empathy, and empathy loss compounds organizational burden.

COGNITIVE LOAD

How Cognitive Load Erodes Empathy

Load does not erase empathy — it hijacks the systems that enable it.



Prefrontal depletion: Empathy shares neural resources with working memory and self-regulation

When the prefrontal cortex is taxed by decision load, perspective-taking capacity degrades — not from choice, but from resource competition.



Attention narrowing: Overloaded minds process fewer social cues and emotional signals

Cognitive tunneling reduces the bandwidth available to read faces, tone, and body language — the very signals empathy depends on.



Processing speed trade-off: Under pressure, we default to categorical thinking over individual understanding

Speed and nuance are in direct tension. Heuristics replace inquiry — "type of person" replaces "this person."



Stress hormones suppress oxytocin, the neurochemical of social bonding

Cortisol and adrenaline directly inhibit oxytocin release. Chronic stress chemically erodes the foundation of connection.



Psychological protection: The mind limits emotional exposure when resources are scarce

Emotional disengagement is an adaptive survival response — the brain's circuit-breaker against overload. In leaders, it reads as coldness.

KEY INSIGHT

Busyness is not an excuse — it is a neurological explanation. Leadership requires managing the conditions that make empathy possible.

Empathy Collapse

The systematic erosion of perspective-taking under sustained organizational pressure.



What It Looks Like

Leaders become transactional — interactions are stripped of warmth and context. Feedback turns purely evaluative, focused on performance metrics rather than the person. Human context disappears from decisions entirely.



Organizational Signals

Rising grievances and attrition spikes signal the breakdown. Disengagement scores climb as psychological safety declines — the organization itself begins registering the collapse before leadership notices.



The Collapse Cycle



Team disengagement creates additional leader burden, feeding back into the cycle. The collapse self-reinforces — each stage making the next more likely.



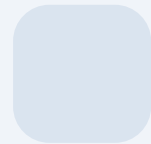
It Is Not Malice

Empathy collapse is not a character failure — it is a system failure. Leaders do not stop caring through deficiency of will; the conditions deplete the neural and cognitive resources that empathy requires.

System failure · Not character failure

Two Faces of Empathy

Both are real. Both are powerful. Neither alone is sufficient for leadership.

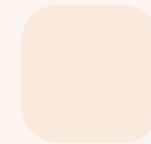


Cognitive Empathy

THINKING · UNDERSTANDING · MODELING

- Understanding another person's perspective **intellectually**
- **Theory of Mind** — modeling their beliefs, intentions, and inner world
- Can be **learned and practiced** deliberately — a trainable leadership skill
- **NEURAL SEAT** Lateral Prefrontal Cortex

vs



Emotional Empathy

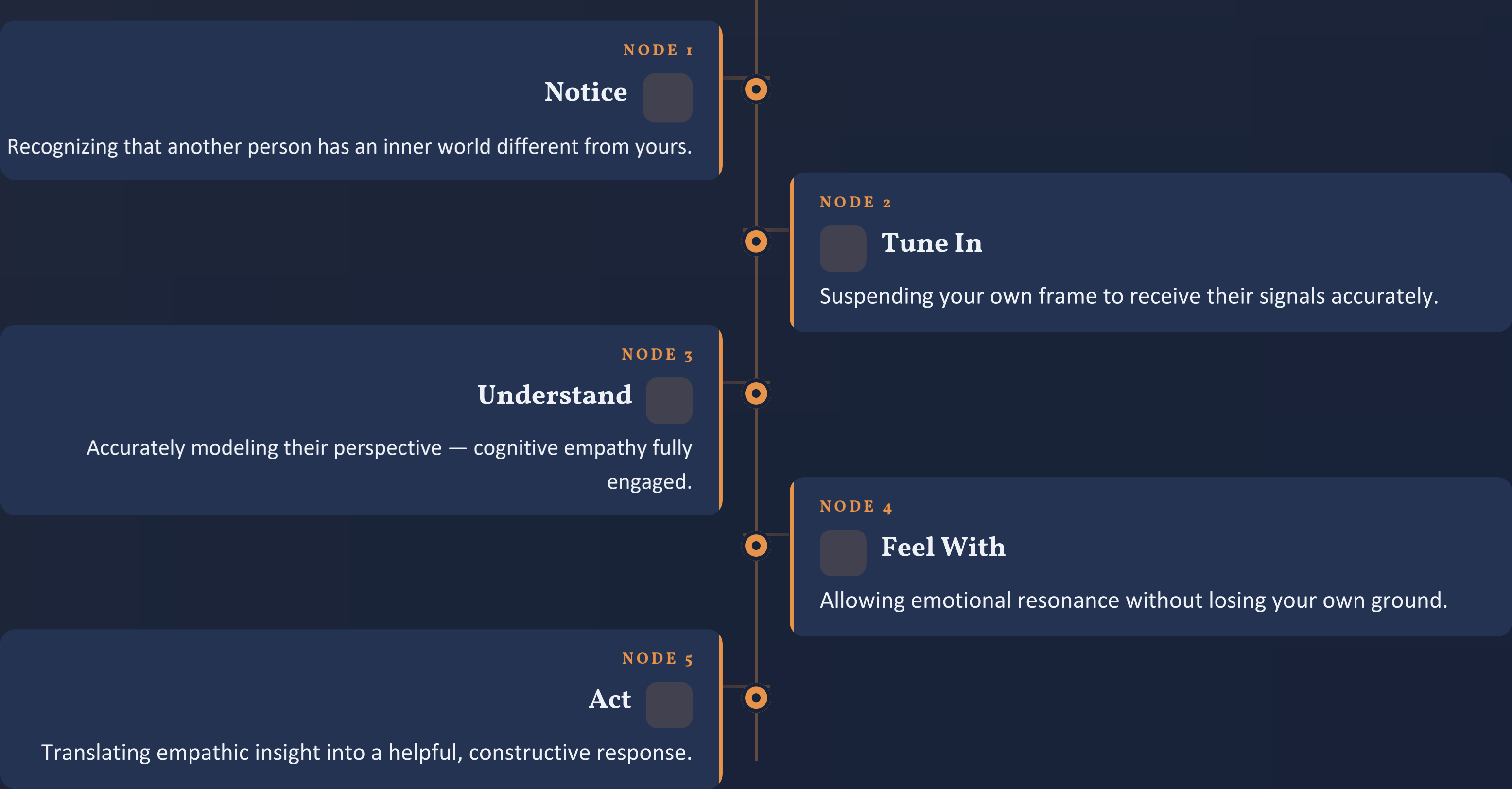
FEELING · RESONANCE · CONNECTION

- **Feeling what another person feels**, often involuntarily and viscerally
- Mediated by **mirror neuron systems** and the insula cortex
- Can **impair judgment** when too activated — emotional flooding overrides reasoning
- **NEURAL SEAT** Shared Emotional Resonance

Effective Leaders Integrate Both — Using emotional empathy for connection, cognitive empathy for action.

The Empathy Spectrum: From Awareness to Compassionate Action

A progression, not a binary — leaders develop range across all levels.



Most empathy training stops at **Node 3**. Leadership requires **all 5**.

The Biology of Empathy

MIRROR NEURONS

1992

Discovered by Rizzolatti; fire when **observing others' actions**, forming the neural basis of imitation and empathic resonance.

Rizzolatti et al., 1992 — University of Parma

OXYTOCIN

Trust+

Released during prosocial behavior; **suppressed by cortisol** under chronic stress. Drives trust, bonding, and social affiliation.

Stress–Empathy Axis · Neuroendocrinology Research

INSULA ACTIVATION

Felt Empathy

Associated with **visceral empathic response**; significantly stronger in those with sustained mindfulness practice.

Davidson, R.J., 2012 — University of Wisconsin

TRAINING DURATION

8 Weeks

Mindfulness training of this duration measurably **increases empathic accuracy** and strengthens insula-based neural pathways.

Klimecki et al., 2014 — Max Planck Institute

Key insight: Empathy is not innate luck — it is a trainable neural system. Leaders who invest in the biological conditions for empathy build a durable cognitive advantage.

Building **Biological Resilience** for Empathy

Leaders must actively maintain the neurobiological conditions that enable perspective-taking.



Sleep

7–9 hours maintains prefrontal regulation; sleep deprivation reduces emotional recognition by 20%+



Regulated Breathing

Activates parasympathetic nervous system, restoring oxytocin production and reducing cortisol



Exercise

20 minutes aerobic activity increases BDNF — the brain's growth factor — enhancing neural flexibility



Social Connection

Quality social interaction sustains mirror neuron sensitivity and reduces empathic decay



Micro-Recovery

90-minute ultradian rhythm — schedule cognitive pauses to prevent empathic depletion



Reflective Practice

Journaling and structured debriefs rebuild empathic processing pathways over time

Biological resilience is not self-care — it is performance infrastructure for empathic leadership.

Cognitive Biases That Block Empathy

Biases are not character flaws — they are cognitive shortcuts that become liabilities in leadership.

In-Group Bias	Confirmation Bias	Affect Heuristic
We extend greater empathy to those who resemble us. Homogeneous teams amplify this effect, creating invisible circles of consideration that leave key voices unheard.	We seek information that validates our existing view of a person, systematically ignoring disconfirming evidence — locking our perception in place before full understanding.	We judge people based on our emotional response to them rather than evidence. Liking someone inflates our view of their competence; discomfort with them shrinks it.
Status Bias	Availability Heuristic	Just-World Bias
Empathy flows upward. Leaders and high-status individuals receive more consideration and benefit of the doubt than frontline workers, widening the empathy gap inside organizations.	Recent, vivid experiences of a person dominate our interpretation of their behavior disproportionately — one bad meeting can override months of evidence when evaluating someone.	The belief that people get what they deserve removes the leader's impulse to understand context. It replaces curiosity about circumstance with a verdict about character.

Leadership insight: You cannot eliminate bias — but you can interrupt it. Recognition before reaction is the essential first skill. Name the bias before it names the person.

Fundamental **Attribution** Error

"The tendency to attribute others' behavior to their *character or disposition*, while attributing our own behavior to *the situation*."

— LEE ROSS, STANFORD UNIVERSITY, 1977

THEM

OTHERS' BEHAVIOR

They missed the deadline

Character conclusion:

They are **lazy** / **irresponsible** / they don't care.

Context eliminated. Inquiry ends here.

VS

US

OUR OWN BEHAVIOR

I missed the deadline

Situational justification:

I had too much on my plate / the **system** failed me.

Context preserved. Inquiry continues.

FAE is the **single greatest obstacle** to empathic leadership — because it **eliminates context before inquiry begins**.

F&A; in Leadership: Two Paths

Same behavior. Radically different leadership responses.

SCENARIO: A team member pushes back on a decision in a team meeting.

F&A; Response

ATTRIBUTION TO CHARACTER

INTERPRETATION

"They are being difficult. They resist change. They don't respect authority."

LEADER ACTION

Shuts down the conversation, documents the behavior, increases monitoring.

OUTCOME

Trust erodes. Psychological safety drops. *The team learns not to speak up.*

vs

Empathic Response

ATTRIBUTION TO CONTEXT

INTERPRETATION

"What information might they have that I don't? What pressure are they under? What need is unmet?"

LEADER ACTION

Asks a curious question. Seeks to understand before responding.

OUTCOME

Team member feels heard. Issue is resolved or legitimately explained.
Psychological safety preserved.

The leader's **intervention point** is always the **interpretation**, not the behavior.

The ACT Model

A Framework for Empathic Leadership Under Pressure

A

ACCEPT

What Is Real Right Now

C

CONNECT

To The Person,
Not The Problem

T

TRANSFORM

Insight Into
Purposeful Action

ACT: The Three-Stage Process

Each stage requires a specific leader competency.

I STAGE ONE

ACCEPT

Acknowledge what is *actually* happening — not what you wish were happening. Suspend judgment and defensive interpretation.

Psychological flexibility: the ability to hold discomfort without reacting from it.

LEADER PRACTICE
"Name the situation neutrally before forming an opinion."

THEN

2 STAGE TWO

CONNECT

Actively direct attention toward the other person's experience. Ask questions that *open* rather than close understanding.

Resist the pull toward problem-solving before understanding is complete.

LEADER PRACTICE
"Reflect back what you heard before offering any response."

THEN

3 STAGE THREE

TRANSFORM

Use empathic insight as the input for purposeful, values-aligned action.

Empathy without action is compassion fatigue; action without empathy is compliance management.

LEADER PRACTICE
"Decide what the situation calls for — support, accountability, resource, or advocacy."

ACT — **Accept:** Psychological Flexibility Under Pressure

Acceptance is not agreement. It is the refusal to let discomfort drive your response.

Defusion Separating yourself from automatic thoughts — <i>"I am noticing the thought that this person is being difficult"</i> vs. <i>"This person IS difficult"</i>	Equanimity vs. Suppression Acceptance is conscious acknowledgment, not emotional shutdown — staying open without being overwhelmed
The 90-Second Rule (Jill Bolte Taylor) A physiological emotion lasts 90 seconds. What persists beyond that is the story you choose to tell yourself	Noticing Bias Activation HALT check — <i>Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired</i> — each state measurably impairs empathic processing and judgment
Values Clarity Knowing your leadership values provides a stable platform from which to respond rather than react under pressure	Mindful Awareness A brief body scan before difficult conversations resets the nervous system and restores empathic capacity

ACT — **Connect:** Building Genuine Understanding

Connection requires temporary suspension of your own frame of reference.

Ask, Don't Assume

Use open questions that invite, not close: *What is your experience of this? What do you need right now? What am I missing?* Curiosity is the doorway to real understanding.

Active Listening

Listen to understand, not to respond. Note what is *NOT said* — the pauses, the hedging, the omissions. Tolerate silence. Silence is often where the truth lives.

Reflect & Validate

Mirror back content AND emotion: *"It sounds like you felt overlooked when that decision was made."* Validation is not agreement — it is acknowledgment that their experience is real.

Perspective-Taking Drill

Consciously argue the other person's position *internally* before responding. Steel-man their view. If you cannot articulate their case fairly, you are not yet ready to respond.

Avoid Premature Closure

Resist the pull toward solutions. Connection requires *dwelling in the problem together* first. Leaders who rush to fix signal that being heard matters less than being resolved.

Presence, Not Performance

True connection requires *undivided attention*. No multitasking. No mental agenda. The moment you are preparing your next sentence, you have stopped listening and begun performing.

ACT — Transform: From Insight to Purposeful Action



Values-Aligned Response

Actions flow from your leadership values, informed by empathic understanding — not from emotional contagion or obligation.



Four Leader Responses

Support

Accountability

Advocacy

Boundary

Resource · Compassionate directness · Systemic change · Protective limit-setting.



Naming the Action

Explain why you are taking the action you are taking — close the loop between what you heard and what you chose.



Check In

After acting, re-connect. *"Did that help? What do you need next?"* Empathy is iterative, not a single transaction.



Learning Loop

Use each empathic encounter as data to improve your model of the person and the situation over time.



OBSERVE



ACT



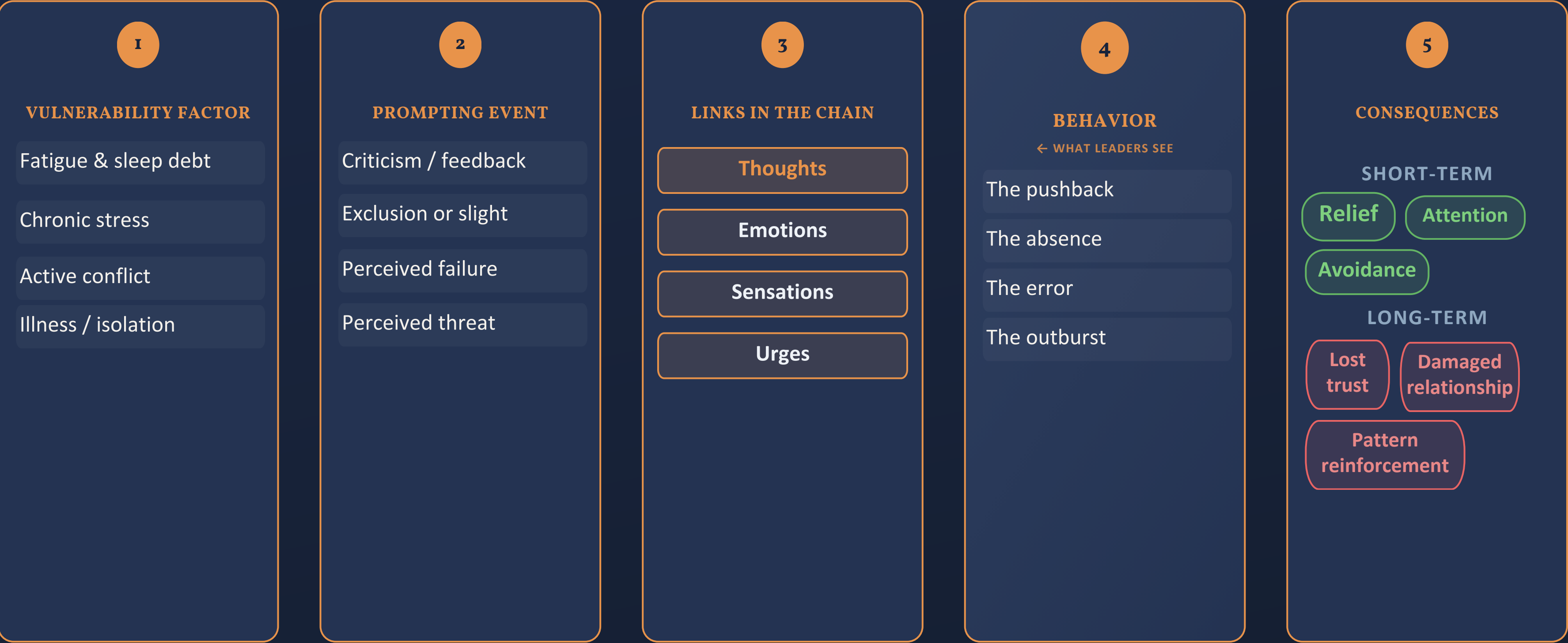
REFINE



Transform is where empathy earns organizational trust — because people see their experience *translated into leadership behavior*.

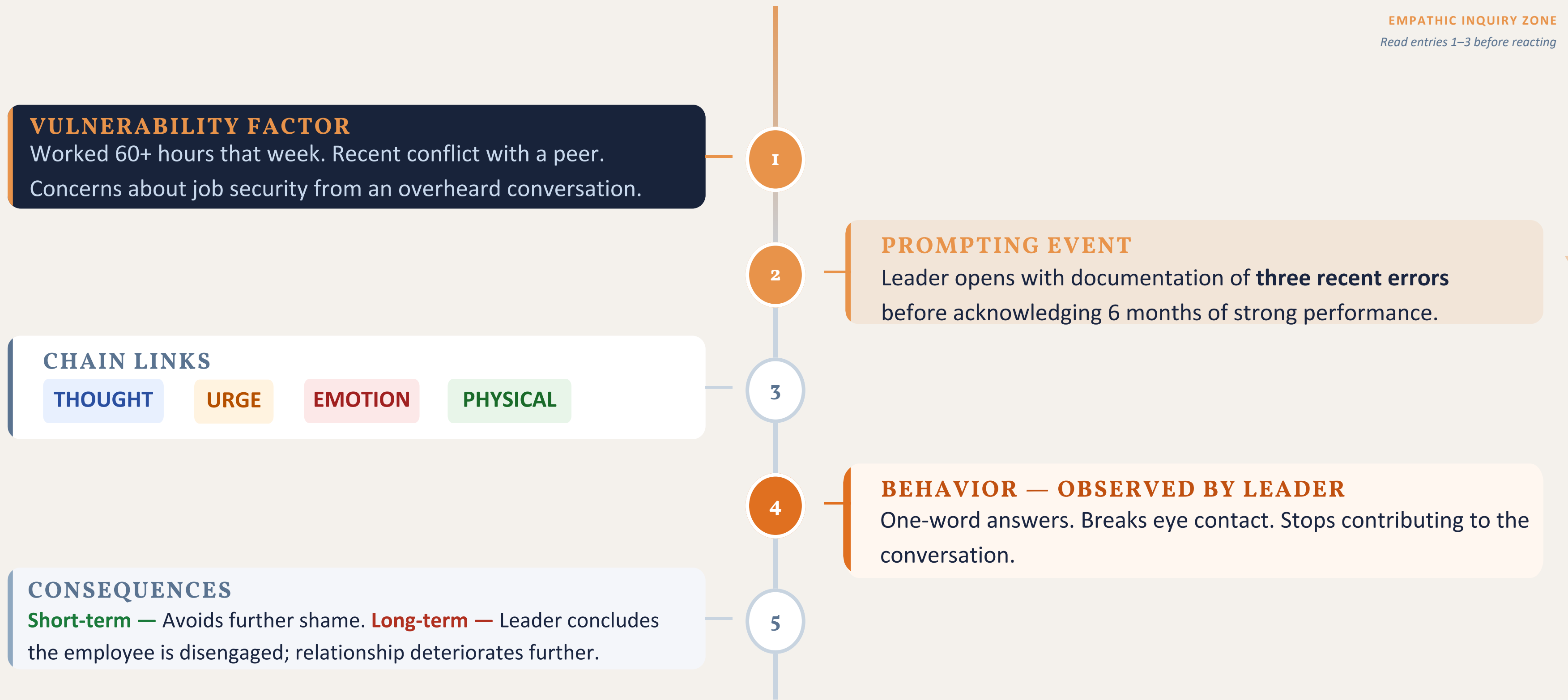
Behavior Chain Analysis

Understanding behavior as an event in a chain, not a character trait.



Reading the Chain: A Leadership Walkthrough

Case example: Team member becomes defensive and silent in a performance review.



An empathic leader reads **Entries 1–3** through inquiry before reacting to **Entry 4**. Behavior is data — not a verdict. Follow the chain upstream.

Behavior Chain Analysis in Leadership Practice

Six habits that apply behavior chain thinking in real-time leadership.



01

Start with Curiosity

Before interpreting behavior, ask: *"What might have happened before this moment?"* Suspend the impulse to label — lead with inquiry.



02

Conduct a Vulnerability Scan

Regularly assess team member wellbeing, workload, and personal stressors as contextual data — not background noise.



03

Work Backward From Behavior

In 1:1s, gently explore recent events: *"Walk me through the last few days before this happened."* Context lives upstream.



04

Name the Chain, Not the Person

"It looks like something triggered a strong reaction — let's talk about what was happening for you" — not *"This is unacceptable behavior."*



05

Interrupt the Chain Early

Build environmental conditions that reduce vulnerability and disrupt chain links *before* visible behavior occurs. Prevention beats intervention.



06

Co-Create New Links

Help team members identify alternative thoughts and responses at each chain link using guided reflection — building new pathways together.

Empathy Traps: When Good Intentions Miss the Mark

Empathy without structure produces as many problems as its absence.

EMPATHY DONE POORLY

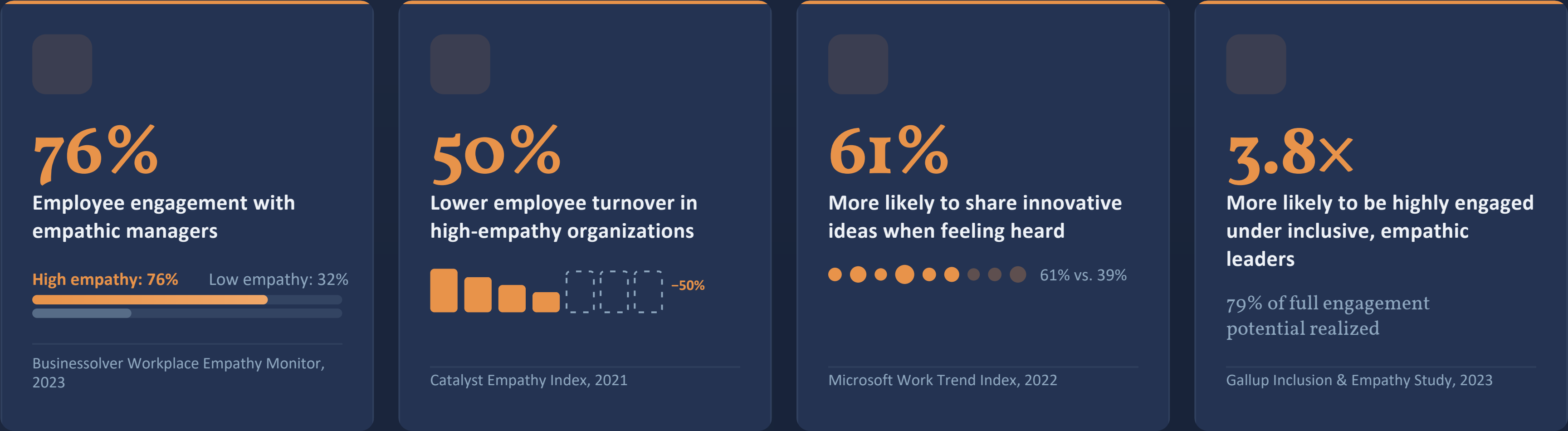
- ✗ Emotional contagion — absorbing team distress until the leader is depleted and unable to function
- ✗ Selective empathy — extending understanding only to high-performers or personal allies
- ✗ Empathy as avoidance — using compassion as a reason to sidestep necessary accountability conversations
- ✗ Over-identification — the leader imposes their own emotional experience onto the team member's situation
- ✗ Empathic exhaustion — giving without replenishing creates cynicism and long-term resentment

EMPATHY DONE WELL

- ✓ Boundaried empathy — present and regulated, not absorbed and reactive; the leader remains grounded
- ✓ Universal application — curiosity extended to every team member equally, without favoritism
- ✓ Compassionate accountability — holding high standards AND understanding context simultaneously
- ✓ Role clarity — the leader stays the leader; the team member stays the expert of their own experience
- ✓ Sustainable empathy — built on biological and psychological resilience as performance infrastructure

The Business Case for Empathic Leadership

Empathy is not an ethical luxury — it is a performance differentiator.



These are not feel-good metrics. They are the business outcomes that determine which leaders and organizations survive the next decade.

6 Leadership Commitments

These are not one-time actions. They are daily leadership disciplines.

1 Manage Cognitive Load — Yours and Theirs.

Empathy requires bandwidth. Protect it structurally for yourself and your team.

2 Know Both Types of Empathy.

Deploy cognitive empathy to understand; use emotional empathy to connect. Integrate both in every difficult interaction.

3 Build Biological Resilience.

Sleep, recovery, and regulated stress are not personal habits — they are empathic leadership infrastructure.

4 Catch Bias Before It Acts.

Name your biases, especially FAE. Ask situational questions before forming character conclusions.

5 Practice ACT

Accept what is real. Connect before solving. Transform insight into values-aligned action.

6 Read the Behavior Chain.

Behavior is data about a system, not a verdict about a person. Follow the chain upstream before you respond downstream.

The goal is not maximum empathy — it is strategic, regulated, universal empathy practised every single day.

Discussion

Q: What did you hear today that surprised you or was a takeaway?

Q: Is there information you heard today that left you wanting to know more?

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