

Authority with Empathy: A New Model of Public Leadership

Atty. Catherine D. Damole, CESE, DPA, JD

Lawyer

Career Executive Service, Integrated Bar of the Philippines

atty.cathyd@gmail.com



Atty. Catherine C. De Asis-Damole is a private law practitioner based in Cebu City. She has served the government for twenty-eight (28) years before her retirement in February 2024. The majority of her functions involved Legal Research, Records Management, Human Resource Development, and other Administrative Support Services. She was an OIC-Division Chief III for Cash and Administrative Support Services at the Home Development Mutual Fund (popularly known as Pag-IBIG Fund), a

premier government financial institution in the Philippines. Before her stint with Pag-IBIG Fund, she was also with the Department of Justice, Office of the Government Corporate Counsel as a Stenographer and later as Chief Records Officer.

Historically, the Philippine government's leadership has been rigidly hierarchical, strictly governed by law, and held accountable through various mechanisms, under the fundamental premise that public office is a public trust. In the author's early years as a public servant, empathy was perceived as admirable but secondary to authority, and there was little emphasis placed on diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, the author's experiences showed that this viewpoint was incomplete.

After almost thirty years in public administration, the author discovered that empathy is required of all leaders in government, not merely a weakness or indulgence. Decisions made on behalf of the public affect individuals and communities undergoing rapid social transformation, and, as a result, poorly designed programs devoid of empathy can feel distant and unresponsive. Empathetic leadership connects policymakers with community members' personal experiences and helps create a strong, effective, and credible governance system.

Leaders in the public sector can use empathic leadership to improve their ethical behavior, the legitimacy of their institutions, and the public's overall commitment to them. Several leadership theories, such as emotional intelligence, define empathy as a core competency of leaders that is learnable; therefore, leaders who possess this competency can manage conflicts, build trust, and respond thoughtfully to the diversity of stakeholders they interact with—particularly relevant in the complex Philippine public sector.

Transformational leadership theories further reinforce the alignment between empathy and the individual motivations of public service employees, as well as the systems that enable transformational leadership. Empathetic leaders create emotional connections among employees' individual needs, their communities, and organizational policy objectives, thereby encouraging public service employees to develop innovative solutions.

Filipino culture has a strong emphasis on collective action and caring communities (*bayanihan*), underscoring the importance of empathy in leadership representation.

The legal and ethical basis for empathy in the Philippine government is articulated in the Servant Leadership philosophy. In accordance with Republic Act No. 6713, public officials must demonstrate professionalism, sincerity, and responsiveness in their roles, thereby requiring public leaders to engage with the public in an empathetic manner. Public leaders who actively listen to and understand their citizens develop greater trust in government and thus build on the principle of public accountability.

Empathy also contributes to creating a psychologically safe work environment in bureaucratic entities. When leaders create work environments where employees feel safe speaking up, the innovation and quality of services provided by civil servants will improve. This is particularly important in government programs delivered on the front lines, as understanding the local context in which they operate contributes to their responsiveness and overall effectiveness.

Applying agile leadership principles in government means empathy will be a critical enabler of agility. Because agile governance emphasizes working collaboratively with stakeholders, engaging with stakeholders, and being responsive to changes in our environment, the values associated with each of those are aligned with the values of empathetic leadership, and therefore, empathy will ensure that agility in government relates directly to the real-life experience of citizens, as opposed to the convenience of an administrative function.

Empathy in public leadership is demonstrated in various ways, including but not limited to, citizen feedback systems, public forums, streamlining services to meet the needs of the citizens, and being sensitive to individuals during times of crisis. These actions create a stronger foundation for government action while reaffirming the government's commitment to dignity, inclusion, and the public welfare.