

# Empathetic leadership the way forward for adland?

By [Firdous Osman](#)

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It's no secret that life in adland can be extremely pressurised and can push one's work/life balance to the edge - so it's not exactly the first industry people to think of when it comes to empathy.



Firdous Osman, SA's Women Leader 2021 and deputy managing director at Saatchi & Saatchi

Since inception, the ad industry has thrived on late nights, high stress, and big rewards. The high-performance environment, never still, is not for everyone but the rush of being a part of an award-winning team or bringing something groundbreaking to life keeps people craving that unrivaled agency experience.

If someone had asked me two years ago if I thought the ad industry was highly empathetic, I probably would have said no. Years and years of high expectations and unfiltered feedback doesn't always create a breeding ground for empathy or empathetic leadership, but everything is very different now.

## **'Empathy epiphany'**

We've heard it before, and we'll hear it again – Covid-19 has changed everything. From the way we live, our value systems, how we shop and of course, the way we do business.

Many will agree that the pandemic and associated lockdowns sparked an 'empathy epiphany' in companies and agencies

around the world, a marked contrast to the work culture we saw in many industries in years prior.

Leaders very quickly started to see the grave importance in understanding and being more respectful to their people and their personal lives, and even more crucial, anticipating and responding to their needs.

But as with everything, it hasn't been smooth sailing from the get-go. The pandemic strained and pushed worker-employer relationships to their limits and developments that might have played out over several years were crammed into a matter of months.

Workers found themselves reconsidering everything from who they want to work for, to the role they expect employers to play in supporting their growth and their values. At the same time, companies and employers not only contemplated their relationships with their workers but started to strongly contemplate their role in society too.

## **Workers & employees agreeing on the future**

Deloitte, in their latest [Human Capital Report 2021](#), showed that the worker/employer relationship, although front and centre, was still not completely aligned with its evolution in 2021, noting that 40% of the global workforce considered leaving their employer in 2021, 63% of the workers surveyed feeling that their relationship with their employer would stay the same and in contrast, 86% of executives believed that their workers would gain greater independence and influence their employers in the future.

Now in 2022, we find ourselves working to return to the office and a more 'normal' way of life and it has never been more crucial to ensure workers and employers agree on the future.

Empathetic leadership is 100% the way forward and it's made up of progressive, everyday actions that may in the past have seemed insignificant, but which help teams and team members to feel understood, and more importantly, wanted.

## **Empathy: a female superpower**

Strong employee relationships are key to success and happiness in the workplace, and it has been found that these come more naturally to female employers.

It's an old adage that crisis define leaders, and Covid-19 has certainly proven that, with more female leaders coming out on top due to their ability to better embrace and instill traits like empathy, listening, creative collaboration and authentic engagement with employees.

The pandemic presented the world with an instantaneous experiment in leadership, and the data shows that employees have been in good hands when women are in the driving seat of nations and companies alike.

I do believe that female leaders are naturally more empathetic, and I see this as one of our many superpowers, particularly in the business world. Some of the ways that I put these powers to work are by creating the right conditions for engagement, fun and performance in our agency.

## **The Great Resignation vs the Great Retention**

Those businesses who have actively embraced the 'new business normal' by finding new ways to better connect with their workers, instituting processes that are people-first and better understanding the need their work/life balance will be more empowered to turn the great resignation (as seen in 2021) into the great retention (hopefully in 2022).

We have all seen a generational shift in the way that we work and there is no way that the world is going back.

Once known as a soft skill, empathy is now very definitely a vital skill that has helped to change systemic cultural norms and

opened up a whole new and better world for staff and leaders alike.

Personally, I can't wait to further implement and build on the positive frameworks and systems we've already instituted, to ensure our people continue to feel heard and respected, that our culture brings out the best in our people and that everyone feels safe enough to experiment and push boundaries to innovate and succeed – the true north star of ad-land.”

## ABOUT FIRDOUS OSMAN

Firdous Osman believes the secret in building a successful agency lays in developing and growing its people and bringing diversity into the workplace. Her work experience spans across multi-cultural brands and categories globally, regionally and locally, in both the private and public sectors. She focused largely on digital transformation and integration into modern marketing over the last nine years.

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