

How to Build
High Empathy
High Accountability
Leaders



Torch

A few years ago, after facilitating an offsite for a hot tech startup, I had one clear conclusion: as soon as their Series A funding was spent, this company would be dead.

My prediction was not based on the fundamentals of the business or the size of the market, but on insights from a decade of practicing family therapy and the academic work that preceded it.

How does a background in family therapy give me license to foresee the rise or fall of a startup? It turns out families and businesses have a lot in common, especially when it comes to predicting leadership potential. After all, the family unit is arguably the first "organization" any person is a part of, and the leadership impressions are inevitable.

To illustrate the connection, let me introduce you to the love-structure spectrum. There is a large body of research from longitudinal studies of youth from the late 1960s into the early 1990s showing that families that index high on structure and high on love are most likely to produce grounded and well-rounded children. Similarly, families that index low on love and low on structure produce children who are unproductive in society and struggle in relationships.

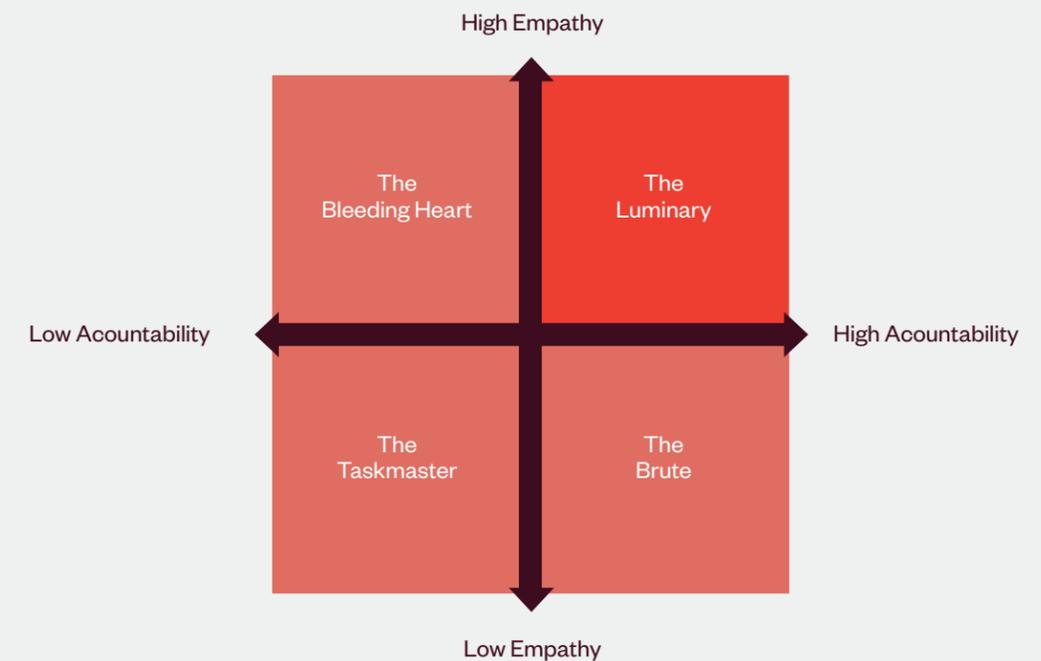
I've found that the same holds true for leaders in business, but in a professional context, I prefer to refer to it as an empathy-accountability spectrum.

In this eBook you'll learn about the empathy-accountability spectrum for leadership and how to build high empathy, high accountability leaders.



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The Empathy Accountability Spectrum



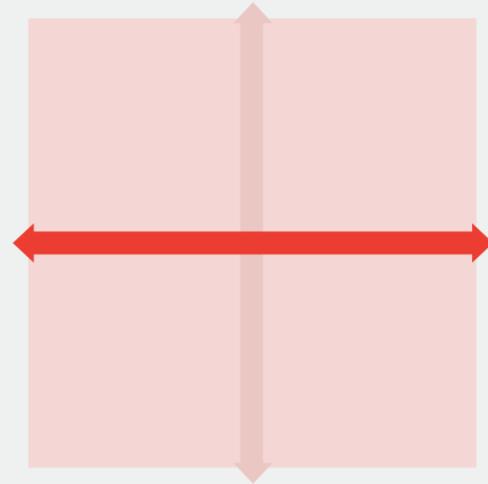
This spectrum helps define leadership and provides a method to understand how their style will impact the organization or team they lead.

- + Individual leaders can be placed on the empathy-accountability spectrum based on a combination of their acquired skills and natural talents.
- + Empathy and Accountability can be codified in company values and operationalized in company processes and procedures.
- + Most leaders are either high in accountability or empathy and low in the opposite, placing them in the top left or bottom right quadrant.
- + Some leaders fall at the low end of both, leading to significant difficulties in managing their organizations.

The goal for great leadership lies in the top right quadrant, where high accountability and high empathy overlap. Let's take a closer look at what success looks like for each axis.

The X Axis: Accountability

When a leader has high accountability, they provide a clear framework for how the business will function. They are present and actively engaged with employees, offering constructive feedback when needed. This often involves a clearly defined performance management system with regular performance reviews and one-on-ones, so employees always know where they stand. Top performers are rewarded with promotion, low performers are placed on improvement plans or moved out of the company.



High Accountability Leaders

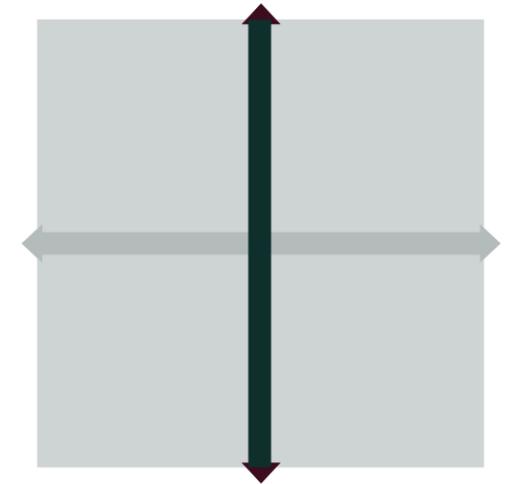
- + Define objectives and key performance indicators and conduct post-mortem reviews
- + Host regular one-on-ones with direct reports, weekly team stand-ups, and communicate progress to investors or senior leadership on a regular cadence
- + Share their own goals and clearly articulated responsibilities to everyone in the company and strive to live out the values they champion

Low Accountability Leaders

- + Lack the planning needed to define objectives and key performance indicators and don't find value in post-mortem reviews
- + Cancel, avoid, or don't plan regular one-on-ones with direct reports or team stand ups
- + If they create goals, they don't share them out to the company, are not good models for living values

The Y Axis: Empathy

When a leader has high empathy, they are able to understand and reflect back the feelings of their team and those around them. This shows up in a number of ways including gratitude, interpersonal care, and emotional intelligence. Empathy is the driver of that "Ah, my boss really understands me as a whole person!" feeling. These are kind, respectful and generous leaders who make their employees feel appreciated and seen.



High Empathy Leaders

- + Go out of their way to have a healthy personal relationship with their employees and colleagues
- + Understand when an employee must take time off for a family matter or personal health
- + Demonstrate gratitude and kindness in their daily actions and provide positive feedback that calls out high performance, even outside the performance review cycle

Low Empathy Leaders

- + Focus more on their own feelings than understanding those of others
- + Don't take the time to invest in getting to know their employees and colleagues personally
- + Get frustrated or gruff when employees ask for time off related to family or personal health

Next, we'll explore what leadership looks like when these axes are crossed in the empathy-accountability spectrum.

Flawed Leadership

The Brute - Low Empathy and Low Accountability

When a leader is both low in empathy and accountability, they will struggle to earn the respect of their employees and fail to generate the growth their company needs. This is true no matter how intelligent they may be. The Brute struggles to make employees feel safe or well guided. This kind of leadership results in high turnover, low productivity, and constant uncertainty.

This type of leader is common in smaller companies because they can do a lot of the work themselves. They can be people who started an idea first to market so the company is growing quickly, despite their lack of empathy.

The Taskmaster - Low Empathy and High Accountability

When a leader is low in empathy but high in accountability, they can help their company grow as long as business outcomes are positive. Employees will generally tolerate The Taskmaster if it means personal and professional success. However, if the company goes through difficult times, employee churn will increase. This kind of leadership results in high turnover during hard times, generally high productivity, and high stress for employees, especially those needing developmental support.

This type of leader is common in high functioning and successful startups because they are building a brand that people want to work for even if the reality of work life is sometimes unpleasant.

The Bleeding Heart - High Empathy and Low Accountability

The inverse of The Taskmaster is The Bleeding Heart. This high empathy but low accountability leader is fun and enjoyable to work for, but companies tend to move slower under their guidance. These leaders are less likely to push for performance, and they over-index on being liked by their employees, at the expense of strategic excellence. While employees are generally happy and loyal, the lack of accountability tends to attract people who want a laissez-faire work environment. This kind of leadership leads to lower turnover during tough times, but productivity is mediocre at best.

This type of leader is common in startups with a new CEO or leadership team. One of the most common pitfalls for first time leaders is optimizing for being liked by their direct reports. While most people enjoy being liked, in terms of leadership, it is more important to be trusted and respected than it is to be liked.

Great Leadership

The Luminary - High Empathy and High Accountability

The Luminary leadership style does two important things to help an organization thrive:

- 1 Creates increased loyalty from employees, making them more likely to ride out tough times
- 2 Balances relationships between employees and leaders, increasing overall productivity

Companies with high empathy and accountability leaders create a culture that prioritizes human relationships and experiences without sacrificing corporate success. This kind of leadership results in low turnover, high productivity, and confidence in a shared vision.

This type of leader is common in well run organizations who are fortunate enough to have a CEO who has done their inner work.



How to Build High Empathy High Accountability Leaders

There are several ways to help your leaders develop into Luminaries. To start, you must help them build self-awareness and uncover their growing edges.

It's important to note that not all leaders can or need to become Luminaries. You might just need to recruit leaders that complement others. For example, if they have clear communication, The Brute and The Bleeding Heart can make up the other's blind spots in empathy and accountability.

For example, I know that I am more of an empathetic, relationship builder CEO (my 360 results bear this out as well), so I pro-actively looked for a cofounder who is more process driven, with a background in psychometrics and data science. We complement each other very well, however, I also get coaching that holds me accountable on my development plan as a CEO.

What's important is that all of your leaders take the time to own their areas for growth and take ongoing development seriously. Here are four ways to ensure you're building that mindset into your leaders.



1 Coaching and mentoring

The one-on-one relationship formed between a person and their coach or mentor is invaluable in personal development. At the core of coaching and mentoring is the relationship between two people. The coach or mentor uses their expertise to help the client get where they want to go developmentally. Whether the coach or mentor is using insight from a 360 review or other assessment, they can create a plan for their client and keep your leaders accountable for their own growth.

3 Performance Reviews

While a 360 review assesses personal development, performance reviews assess progress against measurable company goals. One is not a substitute for the other. Performance reviews delivered on a regular cadence give people insight into how others view their performance against strategic objectives of the business. If the 360 is a mirror who the leader is, a performance review is a mirror of operational accomplishments and velocity. Gathering this feedback quarterly or semi-annually provides important insights into a leader's effectiveness across hard skills and strategic outputs.

2 360 Review

A comprehensive 360 review is an excellent starting point for self discovery and an integral part of the Torch platform. In a 360, leaders are evaluated across several key domains through peer feedback and self reflection. In general, 360 reviews assess leadership across soft skills that drive influence, interpersonal relationships and collaboration. A strong 360 tool provides insight into a leader's strengths and challenges and helps to close the gap between how they see themselves and how others see them.

4 T-Groups

Stanford Graduate School of Business offers T-Groups via public extension. T-Groups, originally developed by scholars at MIT, are formatted communication labs that help participants see their own blind spots via constructive feedback from other group members. Feedback, as long as it's provided in a safe, constructive environment, is the most direct way of gleaning these insights. Stanford has made these groups a central part of the curriculum for over forty years.

Taking the Next Step

Torch

You might be wondering how that hot tech startup fared after all.

Despite infinite potential on paper, eleven months after the offsite, the company dissolved into nothingness. With a leadership team composed of Brutish Leaders, it's not surprising.

It takes work to build awareness of one's leadership style. As HR and Learning and Development leaders, providing your company's leadership with coaching and mentoring can be the mirror your leaders need to see themselves clearly.

Speak with Torch today to see how one-on-one coaching and mentoring at scale can help your leaders and your organization reach new heights.

[Speak with Torch today](#)