

Spotlight on Empathy



Empathy means having the ability to sense others' feelings and how they see things

Author and Science Journalist

When you show empathy, you make the effort to 'step into the shoes of another person' and become aware of their feelings and their thinking, and how these affect their perception. Sometimes, you may need to use your imagination to experience things from another's perspective as if you are feeling it yourself. This will help you to understand the needs of others. Empathy does not mean you have to agree with how other people see things, but it does mean that you are willing to understand and appreciate what they are going through from their perspective. Empathy is a key element of Emotional Intelligence.

Distinguish between:

Empathy	Sympathy	Compassion
Feeling with another, using imagination to experience those feelings and share them as if you were the person	Feeling pity and sorrow for someone; you see their distress and realise that they are suffering	A feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another's misfortune, together with a desire to ease their suffering

Three forms of empathy have been identified:

- **Cognitive empathy;** you understand another's thoughts and feelings, in a very rational, rather than emotional way
- **Emotional empathy;** you understand another's thoughts and feelings in a way that you literally feel them too
- **Compassionate empathy;** you understand another's thoughts and feelings, and take action to help

Empathy in Leadership

Leadership is about other people. Empathy is the link between yourself and other people; it is the foundation of you as leader successfully inspiring your team with a compelling vision, motivating them to take action beyond their capability, and taking time to understand their needs for you to support them in dealing with challenges and problems that get in the way. You build trust as a result and stronger relationships among your team members and thereby, better collaboration and improved productivity.

“It’s important that we remind ourselves that the story we tell in our minds is different from the story playing in the minds of others. It’s only through listening intently to others that we can begin to understand these differences.”
(Daskal, L, 2017)

How you, and your team members feel, influences perception of what is going on, and so it is important to understand those feelings so that you, as leader, can react and manage them appropriately.

Being Empathetic

Being empathetic with another person is about gathering real information rather than speculation, it is usually more accurate to talk with them about their experiences than to imagine how they might be feeling. Ask them questions about how they feel; what they want; what they think.

Be sure to spend more time actively listening, rather than talking so that you become aware of what the other person is experiencing and any difficulties they face. Listen attentively and generously to what they tell you; understand, assist, and support, while allowing them to have their moment. Be patient, focus on them completely and be present. Do not get distracted by anything else so that you are able to:

- Understand and share what they are experiencing without passing judgement or making assumptions
- Give them the feeling of being heard, understood and validated.

Recognise that:

- Showing empathy through awareness and understanding takes time and effort
- Showing empathy means putting the other person ahead of yourself
- Understanding why another person thinks and feels the way they do about something can be a challenge

Having empathy will help you to:

- Meet and engage with other people within the context of their own lives
- Create bonds of trust and build better relationships
- Be more aware of the needs of others, their problems and how to best help resolve them
- Create an environment of open communication, trust and effective feedback by encouraging people to feel safe to talk with you, and acknowledging the differences in the way people perceive the world
- Recognise stakeholder concerns
- Gain insight, empathy allows you to think before you judge or make assumptions
- Make more informed decisions
- Respond to, and influence others more effectively
- Reduce conflict
- Hold better meetings
- Encourage flexibility, productivity and emotional balance

References

- Agosta, L (2014). **A Rumor of Empathy – Rewriting Empathy in the Context of Philosophy** Palgrave-Macmillan
- Baron-Cohen, S (2012). **Zero Degrees of Empathy** Penguin Books
- Daskal, L (2017). **The Leadership Gap** Penguin Random House, N.Y, USA
- Epley, N (2014). **Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want** Penguin Books
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. Davidson, R. J. et al. (2017). **Empathy: A Primer (Building Blocks of Emotional Intelligence)** Book 6, More Than Sound, MA, USA
- Shapiro, J (2002). **How do physicians teach empathy in the primary care setting?** Academic Medicine, 77, 323–328