

How to Empathize with Others

APPLICATION

Very broad. Empathy is a powerful skill that can help you build and grow relationships. Lack of empathy places unnecessary and counter-productive distance between people.

INTRODUCTION

Social connection is an important factor in personal and work relationships. Your ability to communicate with others is not only dependent on the content of your communications but also how well you connect at the feeling level. All communications have these two components. Empathy assist both types of communication and is a teachable skill.

DEFINITION

Empathy is the ability to recognize and connect with another person's feelings. When you empathize with another person you are communicating that you understand the feelings that person is having at the moment. It helps you understand and anticipate the behavior of another. Note that it is distinct from *sympathy*, which does include empathy, but is the expression of the desire to see someone's situation improve. Empathy gives personal power because it creates a connection between individuals. It is particularly important in communications where there are negative emotions that are held by one or more parties that are or may be blocking effective communication. A common misunderstanding about it is that when you do it that you are signaling agreement with the other person's position. This is not the case. You can disagree and still empathize with the other person's feelings. Use empathy when you feel the conversation or relationship may be at risk because of heightened emotions.

KEY POINTS

1. Common Misstatement – You are not empathizing with another person when you say “I understand how you feel.” This is ineffective for two reasons a) it does not articulate the specific feeling that is held and b) it is overused as a way of smoothing over a situation and avoiding discussion of feelings. This is a very common mistake. This is “*false empathy*” which often worsens a situation, because it does not show personal care.

2. Observe – The first step to empathy is to observe the other person as you approach and as they speak. Look for body language and facial expressions that suggest heightened emotions such as distress, anger, or disappointment. Prior experience of that person is helpful. It is useful to develop the habit of always trying to observe for the other person's state of mind. Highly analytical people have a tendency not to do this and are especially benefited by practice in this skill.
3. Identify the Feeling – The next step is to carefully listen to the other person for cues about feeling. What is motivating their conversation? If you are still not clear what the feeling is, then it may be helpful to ask questions. This is often referred to as "checking in." *"What's going on, you seem upset."*
4. Test Your Understanding– Once you think you have identified the other person's feeling, you might want to acknowledge it as a way of testing if you are correct. You might say in a sincere manner, *"I think I might have done something to upset you. Is that correct?"* Do not state the obvious - if the person has already indicated they are angry you will be perceived as insincere.
5. Connect – Ask questions that help you understand the situation behind the other person's feelings and how it connects to the content of the discussion, or you and your behavior. Probes such as *"help me understand how I have contributed to this situation"* can be useful. Then listen actively for more information.
6. Empathize – Complete your empathy by stating the emotion that you understand the other person has with what you know to be the content of the situation. For example, *"I understand now that you are upset with me because you feel I did not support you in the staff meeting."* If the emotional level is high, you may need to restate this several more times at appropriate intervals in order to be heard.
7. Move on – once you have completed your attempt or attempts at empathizing, you may notice a change in the other's demeanor or conversation. This means they accept your effort to connect. Now you can continue with the business at hand knowing that you made an honest effort to connect with the other person.