

OPINION

How to display true empathy in the workplace

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Effective communication is more than just speaking and listening. It is the ability to understand other people's words and their unspoken or partly expressed thoughts, feelings, and concerns. This latter skill – the ability to see things through someone else's eyes – is empathy. Because empathy relies on a lot of non-verbal cues, our current world of remote working can present several challenges.

But being empathetic is a goal worth pursuing. People who are empathetic have higher-quality working relationships with their colleagues, their staff, their clients and their superiors. People feel understood, they are more receptive to others' concerns, and this leads to better team cohesion and collaboration, more engagement, and ultimately greater organizational success.

So there are clearly very good reasons to hone your empathy skills. And yes, just like almost every leadership trait, learning to be empathetic is a skill. But there are some who believe that empathy equals weakness; that others will take advantage of you if they think you are soft-hearted. If that is said about you though, then it is because you are not using demonstrating empathy effectively. So how can you be empathetic without being perceived as a pushover?

Empathy means being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes and try to feel what the other person is feeling. Sympathy, on the other hand, is more cognitive in nature. It means you understand what someone else is undergoing, but keep an emotional distance.

Empathy acknowledges and experiences; sympathy comprehends and invariably tries to offer a solution. Put more concisely, empathy feels connection and sympathy drives disconnection.

The foundation of empathy lies in a single premise: others must believe that you see, truly see, their perspective. And, here's an important tip: in order for people to believe that you see their perspective, you must acknowledge what you believe that perspective to be. It's only when they hear you articulate it that they know that you "got it." With that in mind, here are four powerful ways to be more empathetic.

Listen more. Just listen. Stop talking. Don't try to offer a solution or dismiss the situation. Make eye contact (if possible), and take note of their voice and body language. Try to feel what the other person is telling you, attempt to see their point of view, and think about what is important to them. You don't have to agree, but it is essential to see their perspective. Since so many of us are not seeing each other face-to-face nowadays, try to schedule a video call. If that's not possible, go for the telephone rather than e-mail or text. Even tone of voice will give you non-verbal cues that will help you hear what the other person is really saying.

Don't judge. Yes, that may be easier said than done, but hold back from assessing the situation using your own value filter, even if it's just in your head. Sometimes, victim-blaming is automatic and involuntary, so be deliberate about holding back. Try to put yourself in the person's shoes and feel what they might be feeling.

Seek to understand. Start by paraphrasing. Repeat back to the person what you heard them say. Remember, the underlying premise of empathy is that the other person needs to believe that you see their perspective. That starts with them knowing that you heard and understood them. Ask clarifying questions. It shows that you have a genuine interest in what was said. Once again, watch for non-verbal cues as much as possible.

When you paraphrase, don't just paraphrase the facts you heard, also try to paraphrase any feelings they might have expressed. "I can tell that this situation has been overwhelming for you." If you're not sure of how they're feeling, ask. "I can tell that this has been a difficult situation for you. Are you feeling overwhelmed as a result?"

Show that you care. Empathy never starts with the phrase "At least ..." (even if it's true). As in "At least the kids are fine." Sure, the intention is to make the person feel better, but it

is not empathy, and it doesn't work. So instead, listen, and then express and demonstrate to them that you are there if you are needed.

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