

Practices for Demonstrating Empathy in the Workplace

These practices have been developed to help leaders at all levels to develop and demonstrate empathy. These practices, when employed in combination, will help leaders to connect more fully with their co-workers, to gather more and better information and to deliver better results for their organizations.

Practices 1-5 involve developing empathy for others from within yourself. In these practices, you are not saying or doing anything other than listening, attending and attuning with the other person. Practices 6 and 7 reveal how to use the information gathered in Practices 1-5 to actively demonstrate empathy with the other person.



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Practice 1

Identify Opportunities for Empathy

Opportunities for empathy abound in everyday conversations. We simply miss the cues. So what are the cues?

Words that Convey Feeling: Whether we realize it or not, we convey our internal experience, including our feelings, through the language we use. Listen for words that convey feeling to identify opportunities to empathize. (While all feelings can be empathized with good effect, we'll focus here more on distressing feelings). Words like: Worried, Concerned, Struggle, Challenge, Conflict, Rough, Hard, Difficult, Disappointed, Frustrated, Guilty, Responsible, Grapple, Hassle, all point to opportunities to empathize with our co-workers.

Body language / Facial Expression / Tone / Shifts: Sometimes words don't tell the story - certainly not the whole story. Sometimes what conveys distress more effectively is body language, facial expression, pauses, tone of voice, sighs, or shifts in energy. Body language like: Slumping shoulders, shoulders up by the ears, head down, rigidity can express emotion and provide a clue about the person's internal experience and cue for us to empathize. Facial expressions like the ones pictured [here](#) express emotion. Becoming curious about the emotions presented by facial expressions, and becoming curious about people's experience in general, can make one more empathetic.

Practice 2

Suspend Your Internal Experience and Desire to Fix

The challenges presented to us by others can trigger strong thoughts and emotions in us, and may be followed quickly by a strong desire to fix the situation. The practice here is to suspend our internal experience for the moment.

What does that mean - suspend? It means to put aside, for the moment, our own thoughts and feelings and desires to fix the situation so that we can take in the experience (and the

information within it) of the other person. We can always come back and sort through what we think and feel later; it'll be there. If we don't suspend it for now, we might miss the opportunity to be empathetic, to connect and to understand the other person and the situation more fully.

Practice 3

Let Silence Work In Your Favor

Saying nothing at all is often the best way to learn more about the experience of another person. Silence alone has a way of making people feel encouraged and almost obligated to continue talking. When you are not sure what the other person is thinking or feeling or are trying to suspend your own thoughts and feelings, consider saying nothing at all. Simply listen, to and for the thoughts, wants and feelings of the other person and what's underneath them all.

Practice 4

Identify the Internal Experience of the Other Person

Once we've tuned into the words and physical experience of the other person, we want to attempt to identify their experience. What are they feeling? What are they thinking? What are they wanting? Try to name it; put words to it.

This is often the most challenging practice because it requires us to grapple with describing what someone else might be experiencing, whether their words convey it or not.

Practice 5

Take Their Perspective

People with lower empathy accuracy may find Practice 4 difficult, and may especially benefit from Practice 5. Many find it difficult to read people, particularly in situations where their positions are in conflict. Some may find it easier to look into themselves to figure out what the other person might be feeling, than to decipher it from the other person, particularly if the other person isn't sharing.

If you were in their shoes, how might you feel? What might you think? What might you want?

Practice 6

Acknowledge Their Experience Using All of the Information You've Collected

Practices 1-5 are all internal practices performed to collect information about what the other person is experiencing so that you can empathize with it. Practice 6 is the first step in demonstrating what you've learned from the information you've gathered.

Verbally acknowledge what the other person is thinking, feeling and wanting - whether or not you think they are right, whether or not you agree. Your goal is simply to demonstrate to the other your understanding of their experience. Keep articulating their experience until you get it right, to their satisfaction. (Again, even if you don't agree with it.)

Practice 7

Attune with the Whole of the Other Person

Once you've acknowledged the other person's experience, attune with it. Connect as best you can in it. Feel it with them, think about it with them. Sometimes just mirroring the feeling is enough to attune with the other person. Other times, sharing your understanding of the situation is enough. Other times mirroring their words, their tone of voice, their body language will convey your attunement.

Example

Bill and Ted

OK, all of that is pretty conceptual. How does it play out in a real work situation? That's where we return to Bill and Ted. Here is how the interaction between Bill and Ted might have been, if Bill had been following these practices and demonstrating empathy.

Ted: "Bill, I wanted to talk with you about something. *(Bill's head is down, reticent. Then, he looks up, slowly)*. I was preparing my taxes for the year and reviewing my financial situation. Doing that made me realize just how different my compensation has been than I expected."

Bill: *(Bill's not sure exactly how Ted is feeling about the situation so he encourages him to continue)*. "And?"

Ted: "Well, I made certain promises to myself and my family. That we wouldn't go backwards.....financially."

Bill feels the urge to jump in and tell him the company isn't going backwards but suspends that feeling and stays silent to encourage Ted to keep talking.

Ted: "And I'm just not sure how we are going to get to where we need to be as a company so that I can get the compensation I've been

planning....promising.”

Now Bill has a lot of information and a lot more than he would have if he'd jumped in and told Ted, "You knew what you signed up for!" or "You're just as responsible for where the company is as I am" or "This is how business works. It's uncertain." All common and very unempathetic responses.

Bill continues to suspend his internal experience and all of his distressing thoughts and feelings of sadness and responsibility and instead chooses to empathize with Ted. Having tuned into Bill's body language and put himself in Ted's shoes, Bill acknowledges Ted, reflecting not only the content of what Ted said, but also what's underneath it.

Bill: “First, Ted, thank you for telling me. This must have been a difficult topic for you to raise. I appreciate you bringing it up so we could talk about it. Second, the company certainly hasn't performed the way either of us would have liked. And it's put you in a difficult situation with the promises you've made to yourself and your family. I know you well enough to know how important promises are to you. You're uncertain about the future of the company, and if it can get you where you want, and need, to be financially.”

Bill has restated the essence of Ted's situation, demonstrating that he understands, that he 'gets it.'

Ted relaxes a bit. He'd been preparing for some resistance.

Ted: “Yeah, that's mainly right. It's not that I'm completely uncertain about the future of the company. Shoot, we've been elbow to elbow in the strategic planning process for weeks so I get what we've planned.”

Bill stays silent, letting silence do the work.

Ted: “It's just that.....I'm just not sure how confident I am that it's all going to come together. That we'll raise the money we need, hire the people we need, meet the financial goals we need to hit.”

OK, NOW Bill has something he can work with. He knows what's underneath this conversation, what's going on with Ted, and importantly, what he might be able to do to help the situation. And notice, it's not necessarily about paying Ted more money. Bill attunes with Ted's experience.

Bill: “I can see how all of this could be really very unsettling. It's the first time you've worked at a small company and small companies come with a lot of

uncertainty”.

Ted: “Yeah, that’s true.”

Bill: “How would it be if we took a closer look at the elements of our plan that feel the most uncertain and see what we can do to reduce our risk and increase the likelihood that you are where you want to be comp-wise going forward?”

Ted: *Looking relaxed and relieved.* “Yeah, that’d be great. I really appreciate it, Bill, being able to talk through it with you this way.”

The significance of empathy in the workplace is all too often underrated. Practice and demonstrate empathy in your professional life, and not only will you as a leader stand out, see the payoff and benefit from it, but so will your colleagues and employees.

Want yet more ways to increase your empathy and emotional quotient? Get our popular handbook, [EQ Fitness Handbook: 300 Daily Practices to Build EQ Fitness](#).



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