

## Understanding & Exploring Empathy

Empathy refers to our ability to understand and appreciate how another person feels in a situation. Being able to see things from another person's perspective and acknowledge to them that we understand how they feel, is an incredibly important part of teamwork and collaboration. Empathy is the cornerstone of any interpersonal relationship. Without it, people can never relate to each other on a truly personal level.

Being a good listener doesn't make you empathetic, but it's very important. Empathetic people tend to be very good at detecting shifts in facial expressions and body language. If they notice a small change in the other person's face or posture - we call these small changes micro-expressions - during a conversation, they may stop, then check back in with the person to figure out what might have caused the change.

Empathy is often confused with sympathy, but they're two very different things. Sympathy is when you feel sorry for someone. Empathy allows you to understand why the other person feels sad, and it leads you to offer support without feeling responsible for their experience or the situation.

People who are very high in Empathy will work actively to understand a situation better, and to see it from the other person's point of view. They may ask lots of questions and will listen intently not just to what is being said, but also to what lies behind the words. They will avoid hurting other people's feelings whenever possible and are often good at predicting how someone may act, because they have considered what emotions may be driving the other person.

Those lower in Empathy may seem aloof, cold, uncaring, or self-centered. They're less concerned with the emotions and feelings of others, and the effect of a given situation on those

around them. They may say or do things with little consideration for their emotional impact on others and can often be surprised when people don't act in the way they want or expect.

When you think about your own levels of Empathy, what comes to mind? Do you feel that you generally care about how others may be feeling? In conversations, do you “seek first to understand, and then to be understood,” as Steven Covey once said?

Here are three reflective questions you can use to explore your own Empathy.

1. Think back to a time when something you said or did caused an unexpected reaction in someone else. What were the circumstances, and what could you have done to predict the outcome more accurately?
2. In conversations, do you ‘seek first to understand, and then be understood?’ Write down a recent example where you did this. What positive outcome resulted from this approach?
3. Identify a recent experience in which you felt that someone did not demonstrate Empathy towards you. Why have you chosen this event? What was the situation? Did the other person make any effort to understand your position? What can you learn from this experience that could enhance your own understanding of Empathy?

To build your Empathy, try the following:

1. When saying thank you, take some time to think about how the other person might like to be thanked - the words you might use, or the method by which you might express your gratitude.
2. Use the Emotion Wheel (see end of this document) to assess a conversation you've had: what emotion did you experience during the conversation, and what emotion do you

think the other person felt?. Are they the same, or different? If they're different, analyze why that might be.

3. Ask open-ended questions. Instead of "Did you have a good day?" ask "What did you get up to today?" - and then actively listen to the response to determine exactly what kind of day they've had. This will give you more insight into the other person's experience.

Working with people who are low in Empathy can be challenging, because it seems that they really don't care much about other people. They can do or say things that hurt or disadvantage other people - not necessarily on purpose, but because they don't consider the potential negative impacts of what they are doing. If they're told that they have offended or upset someone, they'll often think that the other person just needs to toughen up and get on with it.

Here are three tips for working with people who have a low sense of Empathy:

1. Recognize that someone who offends you may not be doing it deliberately - they probably just haven't thought things through. Consider your response carefully before reacting.
2. If you think it's important that someone know they've offended you, engage them as directly as possible - "Yesterday you said this, and the impact on me was this" - and then tell them you experienced that impact. Focus on the issue or the behaviour, not on the person.
3. If you notice that someone is negatively affecting others, you may want to let them know. But again, be specific, and don't be surprised if they dismiss what you say or have no idea what you mean.

Those who are high in Empathy care deeply about understanding other people and try not hurt others with their behaviours. But this can be challenging to work with as well. For example, someone with too high a level of Empathy may avoid having a difficult conversation with a colleague, out of fear of hurting their feelings. People with high levels of Empathy can also become annoying, and even distract from doing any work, by 'checking-in' constantly with others to see how they are doing, or to ensure that they are not offending them.

Here are three tips for working with people who have a very high sense of Empathy.

1. If they check-in with you to see how you are doing, respond truthfully, and thank them.
2. If the check-ins become too much, respectfully ask them to stop, and explain that if there is a problem, you'll let them know.
3. When receiving feedback or input from someone high in Empathy, recognize that their feedback may be very useful if your own Empathy is lower. For example, they may have seen or felt things that you have not.

# Emotion Wheel

