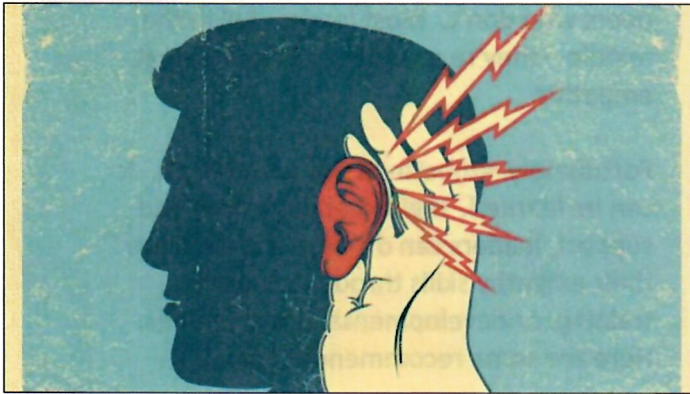


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To improve their performance and effectiveness, leaders may need to develop a stronger ability to show empathy to others. Some people naturally excel at this



EMPATHY & LISTENING SKILLS

Tools for Effective Leadership



Empathy is the ability to experience and relate to the thoughts, emotions, or experiences of others. Empathy is more than a simple sympathy which is when you recognize the feelings of another even if you don't fully understand them.

ABSTRACT

Empathy is the ability to experience and relate to the thoughts, emotions, or experiences of others. It is a key part of emotional intelligence that is critical to effective leadership. Fortunately, empathy is not a fixed trait—it can be learned. The key is practicing good listening skills. Listening actively helps ensure that you and your team stay engaged to perform at the highest level. Moreover, when leaders are good listeners, they provide a critical service to subordinates because they are better equipped to intervene if concerning emotions arise, such as intense stress, despair, and hopelessness. Active listening will help you connect with and care for others. It may even help save a life. This comprehensive paper explains: (1) the difference between sympathy, empathy, and compassion; (2) how practicing empathy fosters trust and harmony at work and home; (3) what great listeners actually do to develop empathy; (4) helpful tips to enhance your active listening skills; (5) what to do if someone initially declines your offer of empathy; and (6) how to avoid toxic communications that harm relationships.

Empathy is the ability to experience and relate to the thoughts, emotions, or experiences of others. Empathy is more than simple sympathy, which is when you recognize the feelings of another even if you don't fully understand them.

Empathy is fundamental to leadership. Authentic leaders need empathy in order to show their followers that they care for their needs and achievement. Empathy is also a key part of emotional intelligence that several researchers believe is critical to being an effective leader. As the popular saying goes, **people may not remember what you say, but they will remember how you made them feel.**

Research has shown that the nature of leadership is shifting, placing a greater emphasis on **building and maintaining relationships**. Leaders today need to be more person-focused and be able to work with those not just in the next office, but also with those in other buildings, other agencies, or other countries. They need to now lead people, collaborate with others, cross organizational and cultural boundaries, and create shared direction, alignment, and commitment between social groups.

One study of roughly 6,700 leaders from 38 countries found that empathy is a skill that clearly contributes to effective leadership (Center for Creative Leadership). Examples of the behaviors exhibited by empathic leaders include:

- Is sensitive to signs of overwork in others
- Shows interest in the needs, hopes, and dreams of other people

- Is willing to help a subordinate with personal problems
- Conveys compassion toward them when other people disclose a personal loss

To improve their performance and effectiveness, **leaders may need to develop a stronger ability to show empathy to others**. Some people naturally exude empathy and have an advantage over their peers who don't. Most leaders fall in the middle—they're sometimes or somewhat empathic.

Fortunately, empathy is not a fixed trait. It can be learned. If given enough time and support, leaders can develop and enhance their empathy skills through coaching, training, or developmental opportunities. Here are some recommendations.

Talk about empathy. Let leaders know that empathy matters. Though task-oriented skills like monitoring, planning, controlling, and commanding performance or "making the numbers" are important, so is understanding, caring, and developing others. Giving time and attention to others fosters empathy, which in turn enhances your leadership performance and improves your perceived effectiveness.



Teach listening skills. To understand others and sense what they are feeling, leaders must be good listeners. Skilled listeners let others know that they are being heard, and they express understanding of concerns and problems. When a leader is a good listener, people feel respected and trust can grow.

Encourage genuine perspective taking. Leaders consistently should put themselves in the other person's place. This includes taking into account the personal experience or perspective of their subordinates. It can also be applied to solving problems, managing conflict, or driving innovation.

Cultivate compassion. Support the leaders who seek to care for their teams as well as consider the effects organizational decisions have on subordinates and their families. Go beyond the typical values statement and truly do things that care for people.

The Difference Between Sympathy, Empathy, and Compassion

Leaders who can effectively focus on others are easy to recognize. They are the ones who find common ground, whose opinions carry the most weight, and with whom other people want to work.

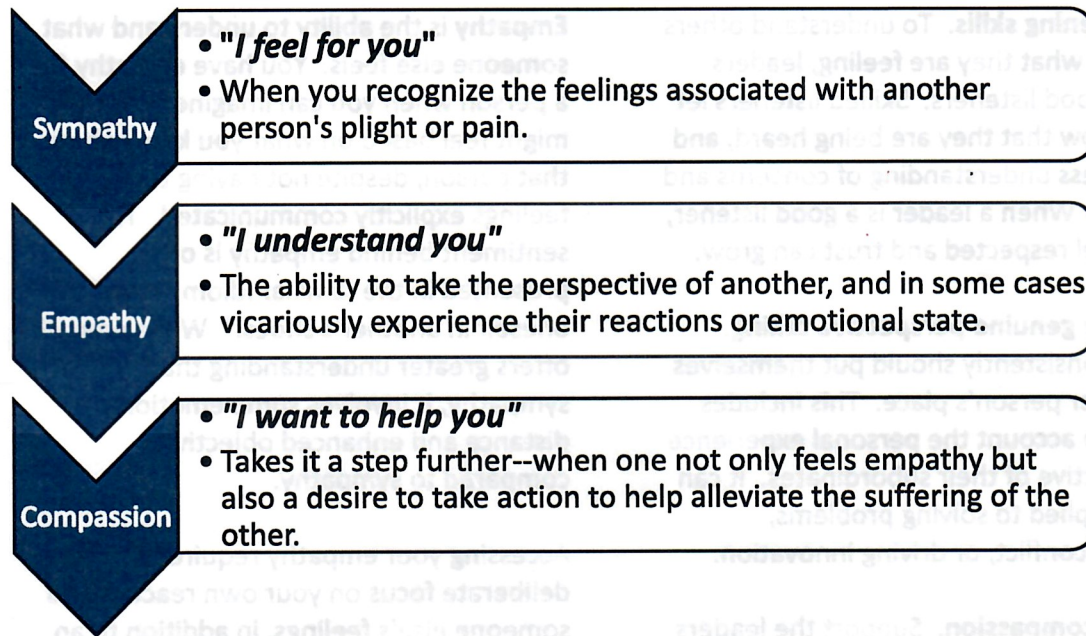
Sympathy is when you recognize the feelings of another, even though you may not fully understand why they are feeling as they do. For example, when a friend grieves over the loss of a loved one, you might send a sympathy card. The card says that you are feeling sad along with your friend because your friend is grieving.

Empathy is the ability to understand what someone else feels. You have empathy for a person when you can imagine how they might feel based on what you know about that person, despite not having those feelings explicitly communicated. The sentiment behind empathy is often presented in the familiar idiom "to put oneself in another's shoes." While empathy offers greater understanding than sympathy, it involves some emotional distance and enhanced objectivity compared to sympathy.

Accessing your empathy requires a deliberate focus on your own reactions to someone else's feelings, in addition to an open awareness of the person's face, voice, and other external signs. Empathy does not mean emotional mushiness, simply adopting other people's emotions as your own, or trying to please everybody. If it were, empathy would make action impossible. Instead, empathy means taking the feelings of others into thoughtful consideration and then making intelligent decisions that work those feelings into the response.

Compassion takes sympathy and empathy a step further. When you are compassionate, you recognize that the other person is in pain (sympathy) or you understand the pain of another (empathy), and then you do your best to alleviate the person's suffering from that situation.

When you're compassionate, you're not running away from suffering, you're not feeling overwhelmed by suffering, and you're not pretending the suffering doesn't exist. You stay fully present. You perform intentional, meaningful acts of service to help others.



Why practice compassion?

Research suggests that being compassionate can improve health, well-being, and relationships. A compassionate response toward another person builds trust and loyalty and makes interactions harmonious. And the opposite of that—when you do nothing to show that you care—creates distrust and disharmony and causes dysfunction at home and work. Here are some of the intriguing findings from this line of research.

- Compassionate action activates pleasure circuits in the brain and increases happiness
- Being compassionate can reduce the risk of heart disease and strengthen our immune response
- Compassion makes people more resilient to stress
- Compassion helps make better parents, spouses, and friends

- Feeling compassion for one person makes us less vindictive toward others
- Employees who receive more compassion in their workplace exhibit more positive attitudes, more commitment, less burnout, greater teamwork, and higher job satisfaction
- Compassionate people are more altruistic and socially adept

Ways to Cultivate Compassion

- Look for commonalities with your team members
- Encourage cooperation instead of only competition in your team
- Cultivate a genuine curiosity about the individuals on your team
- Don't play the blame game
- Lead by example—treating others with compassion is contagious
- Be mindful of boundaries—avoid being an emotional sponge, which could result in overlooking transgressions of others or behaving badly ourselves with extreme loyalty

What Great Listeners Actually Do

Leaders can develop their empathy—The key is practicing good listening skills. Listening actively allows leaders to relate better to others, reflect on new information before expressing ideas, and tune in to content, emotion, and urgency. It will help ensure that you—and your team—stay engaged to perform at the highest level.

Moreover, when leaders are good listeners, they provide a critical service to subordinates and teams because they are better equipped to intervene if concerning emotions arise, such as intense stress, despair, and hopelessness. Active listening will help you connect with and care for others. It may even help save a life.

But what specific behaviors make someone a good listener? Research indicates there are four desired qualities:

GOOD LISTENING INCLUDES INTERACTIONS THAT BUILD UP A PERSON'S SELF-ESTEEM	GOOD LISTENING IS MORE THAN BEING SILENT WHILE THE OTHER PERSON TALKS	GOOD LISTENING IS SEEN AS A COOPERATIVE CONVERSATION	GOOD LISTENERS MAKE TACTFUL SUGGESTIONS
<p><i>The best listeners make the conversation a positive experience for the other party.</i></p> <p><i>They make the other person feel supported and convey confidence in the speaker's ability to solve problems and find solutions.</i></p> <p><i>Good listening creates a safe environment in which issues and differences can be discussed openly.</i></p> <p><i>It is not critical.</i></p>	<p><i>The best conversations are active.</i></p> <p><i>It's a two-way dialogue, rather than a one-way interaction between speaker and hearer.</i></p> <p><i>Periodically ask constructive questions that promote discovery and insight.</i></p> <p><i>Sitting there silently nodding does not provide sure evidence that a person is listening.</i></p>	<p><i>Feedback flows smoothly in both directions with neither party becoming defensive.</i></p> <p><i>Good listeners challenge assumptions and disagree, but the speaker feels the listener is trying to help rather than trying to win an argument.</i></p> <p><i>Poor listeners are competitive—they listen to identify errors in reasoning, using their silence as a chance to prepare their next response.</i></p>	<p><i>Feedback is provided in a way that others will accept and opens up alternatives to consider.</i></p> <p><i>Receptivity to suggestions may be more about the skill with which they are delivered.</i></p> <p><i>We are more likely to accept suggestions from people if we already think they are good listeners.</i></p> <p><i>Combative or critical listeners may not be seen as trustworthy when offering advice.</i></p>

Tips for Active Listening

These tips will help you express active interest in what another person has to say and make them feel heard—a way to foster empathy and connection. These techniques are especially useful for difficult conversations (such as arguments with a spouse or subordinate) and for expressing support. They will help others feel more understood and improve your relationships.

Paraphrase. Once the person has finished expressing a thought, paraphrase what he or she said to make sure you understand and to show that you are paying attention. Helpful ways to paraphrase include:

"What I hear you saying is ..."

"It sounds like ..."

"If I understand you right ..."

Ask questions. When appropriate, ask questions to encourage the other person to elaborate on his or her thoughts and feelings. Avoid jumping to conclusions about what the other person means. Instead, ask questions to clarify their meaning, such as:

"When you say _____, do you mean _____?"

"What are your thoughts on ...?"

"I don't quite understand what you are saying, could you repeat that ...?"

Validate feelings. If the other person voices negative feelings, strive to validate these feelings rather than questioning or defending against them. For example, if the speaker expresses frustration, try to

consider why he or she feels that way, regardless of whether you think that feeling is justified or whether you would feel that way yourself were you in their position. You might respond:

"I can sense that you're feeling frustrated."

"I can understand how that situation could cause frustration."

Or if someone is going through a stressful or painful life experience, you can empathize and show care by saying:

"That sounds really hard. I'm sorry you're going through that. What can I do to help?"

Use engaged body language. Show that you are engaged and interested by making eye contact, nodding, facing the other person, and maintaining an open and relaxed body posture. Be mindful of your facial expressions—avoid expressions that might communicate disapproval or disgust. If you have a natural poker face, or find it easier to pay attention to people's words if you don't make eye contact, share that information with your conversation partner ahead of time, and thank them for accommodating you.

Avoid judgment. Your goal is to understand the other person's perspective and accept it for what it is, even if you disagree with it. Try not to interrupt with counterarguments or holes in their logic.

Avoid giving advice or rushing to a solution. Problem-solving is likely to be more effective after both conversation partners understand one another's perspective and feel heard. Moving too quickly into advice-giving can be

counterproductive. If you've been criticized for offering solutions rather than listening, it may mean that you need to attend to other active listening skills before your suggestions can be appreciated. People will be more open to your suggestions if your listening incorporates the full range of positive conversation skills.

Take turns. After the other person has had a chance to speak and you have engaged in the active listening steps above, ask if it's okay for you to share your perspective. When doing this, express yourself as clearly as possible by using "I" statements and possibly even express empathy for the other person's perspective:

"I feel overwhelmed when you don't help out around the house."

"I know you've been very busy lately and you don't mean to leave me hanging ..."

"That sounds like something I went through."

More Helpful Suggestions to Become a Better Listener

While good listening is universally appreciated, it's rarely taught as an integral part of leader development. Rather than thinking of yourself as a "good listener" or a "bad listener," it can be more useful to evaluate yourself on various subcomponents of active listening.

Getting good at listening is a lifetime endeavor. However, even minor improvements can make a big difference in your listening effectiveness. Here's a cheat sheet with more helpful suggestions to become a better listener.

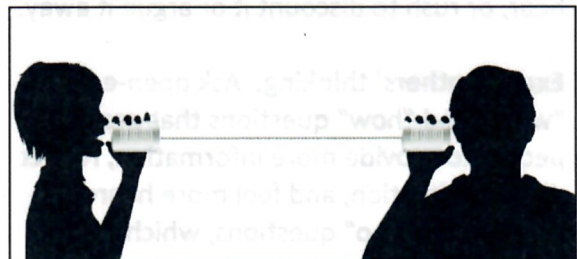
Repeat people's last few words back to them. If you remember nothing else, remember this simple practice that does so much. It makes the other person feel listened to, keeps you on track during the conversation, and provides a pause for both of you to gather your thoughts or recover from an emotional reaction.

Don't "put it in your own words" unless you need to. Multiple studies have shown that direct repetition works, even though it may feel unnatural. Paraphrasing what has been said to you can sometimes increase both emotional friction and the mental load on both parties. At these times, try summarizing only when you need to check your own comprehension. For example:

"I'm going to put this in my own words to make sure I understand."

Pay attention to non-verbal cues in the speaker. Active listening means paying attention to both the explicit and implicit information that you're receiving in a conversation. Non-verbal cues—such as tone of voice, facial expression, and body language—are usually where the motivation and emotion behind the words are expressed.

Minimize distractions as much as possible. Avoid noise, interruptions, and other *external* distractions. Put away your phone. Close your laptop. Don't glance at incoming emails while trying to listen to someone.



Likewise, minimize your *internal* distractions. If you're preoccupied with another topic, take some deep breaths and re-center, or calm yourself before going into a highly charged conversation.

Acknowledge your shortcomings. If you know going into a conversation that you may be a subpar listener—whether from exhaustion or lack of understanding of a topic—let the other person know right away. In addition, if your attention lapses in the middle of a conversation, admit it, apologize, and ask the person to repeat what they said. It happens to everyone.

Don't rehearse your response while the other person is talking. Listen to understand, not to speak. Take a brief pause after they finish speaking to compose your thoughts. This will likely require conscious effort. Stay focused and take in as much information as possible.

Become comfortable with silence. This doesn't mean just not speaking. Rather, it means communicating attentiveness and respect while you're silent. Give others ample time to think before they talk.

Monitor your emotions. If you have an emotional reaction, slow the pace of the conversation. Do more repetition. Pay attention to your breathing. You don't want to respond in a way that will cause the other person to disengage. You also don't want to tune out what you don't want to hear, or rush to discount it or argue it away.

Expand others' thinking. Ask open-ended "what" and "how" questions that prompt people to provide more information, reflect on their situation, and feel more heard. Avoid "yes-or-no" questions, which can kill

conversation. Help the other person think through the problem differently.

Look for the unspoken. Pay close attention to what people are *not* saying. For example, you may notice a hesitancy in their delivery, nervousness in their body language, or an angry tone in their voice. Note and explore its significance.

Don't make assumptions. Rather than assume others view things the same way and want the same things as you do, take the time to get to know them and understand how they see things and what they want. You may never know what the other person really needs or wants from you unless you ask.

What to Do if Someone Initially Declines Your Empathy

Way too often we ask others, "Hey, how are you?" and get the standard response, "I'm good." Then we drop it. Nothing of substance gets shared. The problem is we miss the opportunity to create an environment where people can bring their whole, authentic selves to work—including the bad, the mad, and the sad.



You don't have to be a professional coach or therapist to be the kind of leader or teammate others can confide in. Here are six simple steps to help someone who may not really be "good" to be more likely to share what's going on.

Ask more than once. Taking the time to ask someone how they are more than once—especially if you have the sense they might not be doing as well as they say they are—can make a difference. Such as:

"I know you said you're good when I checked in with you this morning, but I felt like maybe something was off, and I just wanted to check in again. How are you really doing today?"

Then follow their lead.

Ask something in addition to "How are you?" It's helpful to let people know you're not going to leave the conversation at a surface level. If someone responds with a superficial, "I'm good," you might then press with something like:

"Would you tell me if and when you're not good? Because I'm available to talk."

"It doesn't seem like you're good. Can we have a real conversation? What's up?"

Remember details about someone's life, and check in. Ask specific questions about significant events occurring in their lives, such as a sick parent, strained marriage, or a recent combat deployment where they lost a buddy. Something like:

"I know it's been hard since your last deployment. What's it been like for you?"

"How are things going at home lately?"

Notice body language. If someone says they're "good," but they look exhausted or stressed, address what you see not what you hear by asking kindly:

"I know you said you're good, but your face looks like you're worried or pissed. Anything else going on that you want to talk about?"

Model vulnerability by sharing when you're not "good." If you always answer "I'm good"—even when you're not—you're missing an opportunity to be honest, open, and to lead the way for others to come clean. Be willing to take a risk and open up yourself.

Create safe conditions for others to open up. Honor confidentiality. Address your concerns directly with people. Encourage others to seek professional help if you get in over your head. Finally, respect someone's decision to not open up to you.

Avoiding the "Four Horsemen" in Your Relationships

All couples experience conflict, but researchers have found that how partners deal with this conflict has major implications for the longevity of their relationships. Dr. John Gottman and his



colleagues have identified four specific behaviors, which they call the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” which spell doom for couples (and other relationships). To help guard against these toxic behaviors, it’s important to recognize them and consider more constructive alternatives.

Criticism. Some forms of criticism are constructive, but in this case, criticism refers to making negative judgments or proclamations about others in extreme, absolute terms. A sign that you may be engaging in this more harmful form of criticism is if you catch yourself using terms like “never” and “always.” For example:

“You never think about anyone but yourself!”

“You are always so stubborn!”

Criticism is not necessarily a recipe for relationship failure—the problem is that excessive or extreme criticism can, over time, lead to the more destructive “horsemen.”

Constructive alternative: Voice your concerns and complaints in a way that focuses on your own feelings (and how your partner’s behavior affects you). For instance, by making “I” statements and mentioning specific negative behaviors rather than making global attacks on his or her character:

“I feel neglected when you make plans without me” instead of “You are so inconsiderate!”

Contempt. Contempt is a more destructive form of criticism that involves treating your partner (or another person) with disrespect, disgust, condescension, or ridicule. It may

involve mean-spirited sarcasm, mockery, eye-rolling, sneering, or name-calling.

Constructive alternative: Instead of keeping score of all of your partner’s flaws, consider their positive qualities and the things you appreciate most about them. You can even write a list of these qualities and return to it when you need a reminder.

Defensiveness. Defensiveness tends to arise when people feel criticized or attacked—it involves making excuses to avoid taking responsibility, or deflecting blame onto another. It also conveys to others that you aren’t really listening or taking their concerns seriously.

Constructive alternative: Take the time to hear the other person out and take responsibility when appropriate. A simple, genuine apology can go a long way.

Stonewalling. Stonewalling involves putting up a metaphorical wall between you and another by withdrawing, shutting down, and physically and emotionally distancing yourself from them. For example, giving your romantic partner the “silent treatment” or abruptly leaving the house without telling them where you’re going. Stonewalling is especially destructive to relationships because it makes the other person feel abandoned and rejected.

Constructive alternative: If you need time out to take a few deep breaths and collect your thoughts, let the other person know, and then return to the conversation when you’re ready. This way, they will understand that you are taking care of yourself, not trying to reject them.

Conclusion

Empathy is a powerful driver of effective leadership. It contributes to building positive relationships in teams as well as healthy climates across entire organizations. Leaders with empathy are approachable, want to hear what others have to say, and attuned to a wide range of emotional signals in others. They listen attentively and can grasp the other person's perspective. Empathy includes spreading emotions in the positive register (e.g., hope, optimism, belonging), in addition to sensing anxieties, frustrations, and disappointments that can fuel dissent and lower performance. Empathic leaders help out based on understanding other people's needs and feelings. And they cultivate compassionate cultures. Ultimately, this high level of attunement allows leaders to focus the emotions, priorities, and shared values that guide their teams, thereby driving results for their organizations.



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