



Building Relationships Powered by Empathy

Empathy is an effective management tool to build strong and enduring relationships with employees. Learn the seven empathy steps to use in order to build a strong relationship with your employees.

BOB WAS MEETING WITH MR. ROBERTS, THE COMPANY president. Mr. Roberts asked, “Bob, why is there always opposition to anything that we want to change and improve? Also, what about Dunkin? Has he returned to work yet?” Bob replied, “I’ve been supervising this crew for three years and do not know why there is so much opposition. They’re probably just hardheaded. And Dunkin has not returned to work. I expected him back a week ago.”

One reason for Bob’s problem could be that he has not used empathy to build a relationship with his employees to create a satisfying and progressive work environment.

Empathy is a potent managerial tool used to build a strong and enduring relationship—based on trust—with an employee. Establishing a good relationship with employees empowers a manager with the ability to identify and solve problems that arise in business by knowing why employees act and feel as they do.

In the article, “Got Empathy? Client Feelings Run Amok, So Don’t Ignore Them—Work With Them,” George Kinder and Susan Galvan define empathy as the human quality that enables us to bond emotionally with another person’s expressed feelings. Empathetic managers feel their employees’ pain, joy, or sorrow, and understand with their heart and not their mind. “In empathy, there is no judgment, no evaluation of right or wrong.”¹

“Empathy allows you to see things from an alternative perspective; it is the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes without necessarily agreeing with their opinions. You see a situation from their point of view; the chances of success increase dramatically,” says Jeffrey Markley in his article, “Build a Good Rapport: Empathy Is the Key to Winning over Others, Allowing You to See Things from a Different Perspective.”²

Sympathy Versus Empathy

Empathy is not sympathy. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines sympathy as a feeling of sorrow and compassion caused by the suffering and misfortune of others.³ Empathy, on the other hand, is an “involuntary merging with another’s emotional state or condition and that are congruent with the other’s emotional state or situation,” according to Jennifer Escalas and Barbara Stern in their article, “Sympathy and Empathy: Emotional Responses to Advertising Dramas.”⁴

Escalas and Stern describe the distinction between sympathy and empathy further:

People who experience sympathy remain emotionally conscious of their personal lives and understand, but do not experience another’s feelings. People who experience empathy completely forget their own personal existence by sharing the feelings of others. . . . Sympathy stems from the perspective of an observer who is conscious of another’s feelings, empathy stems from that of a participant who vicariously merges with another’s feelings. . . . Some data and studies support the idea that there is causality between sympathy and empathy. The sympathy is the initial response to another person’s feelings and then an empathetic response may follow.⁵

It is important to note that despite the causal relationship between empathy and sympathy, they are essentially different responses to the same stimuli.

Empathy—Special Considerations *The Relationship Factor*

Consider the importance of empathy in the relationship between a manager and an employee before and after an

employee injury. In her article, “Now That I Think of It, Empathy Counts in Dollars and Cents,” Lydia Quarles states that empathy is the key ingredient in having a good relationship with others. This is particularly true in pre-injury and post-injury cases when a person sustains a lost-time injury.⁶

For the pre-injury issue, it has been consistently proven that the “most important factor in return-to-work is the injured employee’s relationship with her supervisor. If it is good, the employee is likely to return to work: the better the relationship, the quicker the return. The converse is true; the worse the relationship, the less likely the employee is motivated to return to work.”⁷

For the post-injury issue, one of the quickest ways for a relationship between the injured employee and the manager to deteriorate during the recovery process is for an employee to believe that the manager does not care. “Failure to notice the injured employee’s fate, hardships, or absence from the workplace is death knell to opportunities to return the employee to work after recovery.”⁸

A little empathy could go a long way. Phone the injured employee and visit them every week or two; it will result in returning the injured worker to work at the right time and with a good attitude.

Empathetic Leaders

In their article, “Integrity, Courage, Empathy (ICE): Three Leadership Essentials,” Stephen Stefano and Karol Wasylyshyn say that empathy enables leaders to balance the meeting of objectives and goals with possessing genuine concern for the people they are leading.⁹

Empathetic leaders are not soft on performance. They are usually hard-core, goal-driven leaders, but they also possess the ability to temper that drive with an understanding of their people’s wants, needs, and desires. . . . Acknowledge and address feelings for any effective thinking to take place because emotions drive behaviors. That puts both individuals emotionally on the same level.¹⁰

In other words, according to Markley, “People say no for rational reasons, and say yes for emotional, political, or cultural ones. The key to influencing another is to understand the relative importance of each, in the other person’s decision-making process.”¹¹

Types of Empathy

There are two types of empathy: cognitive and emotional. The first type is effective and the second is not.

Cognitive empathy involves taking the perspective of another person in order to understand objectively what they are thinking and feeling. Cognitive empathy enables a manager to show empathy to a person without getting carried away in a stream of emotions, feelings, and actions. Use cognitive empathy to diffuse emotional situations by

listening, remaining calm, being non-judgmental, and trying to understand the other person’s distress.

Emotional empathy is responding to another person either by feeling the same pain and discomfort, or by reacting to the emotional experiences of the other person by sympathizing with them. This sort of empathizer bonds emotionally with another person,

losing objectivity and the ability to distinguish why a person thinks and feels in a certain way. Emotional empathy fails to solve problems and may worsen them.¹²

Empathy to Build Trust

There are several behaviors that a manager can learn and develop to gain the trust of employees and build rock-solid relationships. They include acceptance, faith, forgiveness, honesty, hope, humility, and tolerance.

- *Acceptance* means to respect and value a person’s ideas, feelings, opinions, and self-worth. Everyone has a need to be accepted and feel that he contributes to the team and department.
- *Faith* means to believe in the goodness of the heart of people. Don’t waste your time thinking about people’s faults. Instead, identify their good points and believe that people will try to do their best if given the opportunity to do so.



- *Forgiveness* does not benefit the other person; it benefits you. You are not hurting the other person by holding a grudge against them; you are only hurting yourself.
- *Honesty* means getting to know yourself—how you reason, make decisions, and think things through to a conclusion. Once you know yourself, then you can get to know another person’s wants, needs, and feelings. If you cannot be honest with yourself, you cannot be honest with others.
- *Hope* is a realistic belief that even though things may go wrong, they eventually will be resolved. A synonym of hope is optimism, expecting the best outcome to prevail.
- *Humility* is the absence of pride or self-assertion. That does not mean that a person thinks less of themselves than others; it means that a person does not have to rely on their ego to feel good about themselves. The humble person is concerned with their own feelings and desires, and those of other people.
- *Tolerance* is learning how to live with each other no matter how different the other person is from you. The correct measurement of people is how they think, act, and perform. Through diversity, our business, employees, and we will grow and prosper.

Seven Steps To Empathize

Learn from the past to determine how prior thinking and judgments affect your present thinking and that of your employees. Then follow the seven steps to empathize with employees.

Step #1: Stop talking. This is the first rule in effective listening. Stop talking so that you can learn why an employee thinks and feels as he does. Center on the speaker to make him feel uniquely understood. Be conscious of what you are feeling and thinking.

Step #2: Keep an open mind. Keep an open mind to gain knowledge of a person’s thoughts, feelings, and motivations. There is always the chance that your way of thinking may not be correct.

Step #3: Ask open-ended questions. When a person stops talking, ask open-ended questions to show him that you heard what was said and give him the opportunity to respond with an explanation rather than a simple “yes” or “no.”

Step #4: Display patience. Be patient and let a person set the pace to express what is on his mind.

Step #5: Reserve judgment. Don’t come to quick judgments or conclusions. Be patient and gain as much information as possible.

Step #6: Reveal yourself. When the opportunity presents itself, reveal something about yourself to encourage employees to become more open and reveal more about themselves.

Step #7: Be honest and interested. Continue to nurture and build upon the relationship through being honest and genuinely interested in the employee’s well being.

If Bob had used these empathy tools to build relationships with his crew members, his discussion with Mr. Roberts might have gone something like this:

“Bob, why do your people always accept change and work well with you? And I’m glad to see that Dunkin has returned to work so soon after his injury,” said Mr. Roberts. Bob replied, “Mr. Roberts, I’ve been supervising my crew for three years and in that time I have used empathy to get to know my workers and build a relationship with each individual. In fact, that is exactly why Dunkin came back to work as soon as he could after his injury.” **CM**

Endnotes:

1. George Kinder and Susan Galvan, “Got Empathy? Client Feelings Can Run Amok, So Don’t Ignore Them—Work With Them,” *Research* (December 2005): 10-11.
2. Jeffrey Markley, “Build a Good Rapport: Empathy is the Key to Winning Over Others, Allowing You to See Things From an Alternative Perspective,” *Asia Africa Intelligence Wire* (September 3, 2005): NA.
3. Oxford University Press, *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, (New York, NY: 2005): 1711.
4. Jennifer Escalas and Barbara Stern, “Sympathy and Empathy: Emotional Responses to Advertising Dramas,” *Journal of Consumer Research* (March 2003): 566.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Lydia Quarles, “Now That I Think About It, Empathy Counts in Dollars and Cents,” *Mississippi Business Journal* (February 28, 2005): 26-27.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Stephen Stefano and Karol Wasylshyn, “Integrity, Courage, Empathy (ICE): Three Leadership Essentials,” *Human Resource Planning* (December 2005): 5-7.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Jeffrey Markley.
12. Ken Fracaro, “Empathy: A Potent Management Tool,” *SuperVision* (March 2001): 10-13.

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