

Have a Heart

Showing Empathy for Others

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PAGE**

Understanding others

Walk in their shoes

**How to show you
know how they feel**



Put Yourself in Another Person's Place



“If you just learn a single trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks.

You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...

until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”

—Atticus Finch

From *To kill a mockingbird* by Harper Lee

Empathy is the ability to put yourself in another person's place or to see a situation from another person's point of view. Someone who is empathetic can relate to another person's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. In other words, someone who has empathy can feel what another person is feeling or can at least imagine what that person might be experiencing. When you have empathy, you are able to put yourself “in another person's shoes” or to see a situation “through another person's eyes.”

We've already said that Dave is not a very empathetic manager since he isn't sensitive to his employees' feelings and needs. But what about Kelsey? Is she being empathetic toward Dave? Not really. She didn't take the time to look at the situation from Dave's point of view. Maybe Dave knows that sales are down and that the business is struggling. Maybe he knows that if Kelsey, one of his top salespeople, doesn't work on homecoming night, his monthly sales numbers might be so low that the owner will start laying off employees.

If Dave and Kelsey were to communicate and understand what each other is feeling and experiencing, maybe they could work out a compromise with which both would be satisfied. Perhaps Dave could give Kelsey the Friday night of homecoming off in exchange for working on Saturday. That way Kelsey could go to the dance, and Dave could still get the sales numbers he needs to please their business's owner. But such a compromise would only be possible if each person takes the time to empathize with the other.

So What?

Kelsey desperately wants to go to the homecoming dance next month. Her boyfriend Anthony is one of the nominees for homecoming king, and she really wants to be there in case he wins. Dave, Kelsey's boss, isn't willing to give her the time off, though. “I really need you at work that night,” Dave said yesterday when Kelsey approached him about getting the night off.

“Doesn't Dave understand how important this dance is to me?” Kelsey thinks to herself. “If he would just put himself in my place, he would understand that I must have some time off to go to the dance. I can't see how he can work without a result, so I should talk with Dave again about getting the night off, or go to work instead of the dance that night. In any case, Kelsey is not happy with her boss right now.

Being empathetic (unlike Dave) can go a long way toward strengthening relationships, both professional and personal, and help you grow as a person. Read on to learn more about empathy, its importance in business, and ways to be empathetic yourself!

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Objectives:

- A** Describe benefits of showing empathy.
- B** Demonstrate ways to show empathy.



Being sensitive to others' emotions is also key to developing empathy. You must pay close attention to the people around you to become aware of how they are feeling. Interpret people's verbal and nonverbal cues, including what they say, their tone of voice, their facial expressions, and their body language, to get an idea of how they are feeling. If your boss is smiling, then you can probably assume that she is happy, but if she is scowling, you should probably steer clear of her that day. She's not in a good mood!

Understanding the emotions and needs of others is a third important part of developing empathy. Accepting your own emotions and being sensitive to the emotions of others are not enough to develop empathy—you've got to develop a good imagination and try to understand why people feel the way that they do. This doesn't mean that you have to have experienced exactly the same situation that your coworker is going through, but calling to mind a similar situation of your own can help.

For example, your coworker got in trouble at work today for coming in late. You've never been late to work yourself, but you have overslept and missed first period at school a couple of times. It's not exactly the same situation that your coworker is in now, but it's close enough for you to know that he must be feeling upset and on edge because of his tardiness. And that's enough for you to empathize with him about what happened.



The Gray Zone

Jerome and Darryl work together as cashiers at Star Brite Food Mart. A few weeks ago, Darryl told Jerome that his widowed mom had lost her job and that their family was having trouble paying their bills. "If she doesn't find work soon," Darryl confessed, "I don't know what's going to happen."

At the end of their shift yesterday, Jerome spotted Darryl stuffing damaged cans of soup and vegetables into his coat pockets. Jerome didn't say anything to Darryl because he knew Darryl was having the food home for his mom. Still, the situation was awkward. Jerome didn't know what to do.

Should Jerome tell the manager that he saw Darryl stealing, or should he keep quiet? Is there anything else that Jerome can do? What would you do in his place?

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One thing to remember about understanding the emotions and needs of others is that you need to keep an open mind. To truly put yourself in someone else's shoes, you've got to get rid of all of your stereotypes. You can't make assumptions about people because of their race, gender, religion, age, or appearance. To understand another person's point of view, you must realize that s/he is a unique individual and must be treated as such. Only then will you begin to see things as s/he sees them and feel emotions as s/he feels them.



In addition to throwing out all of your stereotypes and prejudices, there is something else that you must keep in mind when showing empathy for others. While it's important to be empathetic, you've got to draw a line between feeling what other people feel and losing your own identity. Understanding another person's emotions doesn't mean giving up your own point of view and feelings. If you allow someone else's negative moods and feelings to affect you too much, you could become burned out and stressed. Worse yet, you and the other person might develop a codependent relationship in which you compromise your own needs and wants to take care of that other person. Such a relationship is not healthy for either of you.

Showing Your Empathy

People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

— Bonnie Jean Wasmund, author

Empathy is a good thing to have. After all, it helps you to build stronger relationships, sell more, solve problems better, and make more ethical decisions. But how can you show your empathy? How can you let people know that you understand what they're feeling and experiencing? Read on to find out!

Listen carefully. One of the best ways to show someone that you are interested in what s/he has to say is to listen carefully to her/him. This means to listen with your ears *and with your eyes* to what the person says, both verbally and physically. Show respect to the person by paying attention and not interrupting. Allowing the person to truly and completely express herself/himself shows that you are trying to understand her/him, which is a sign of empathy. And, knowing that someone is listening may make the person feel a whole lot better.



Speak tactfully. Tact is the ability to do or to say the right thing in any circumstances, so to speak tactfully is to consider your words carefully before saying them. (But of course not while someone else is speaking!) Empathetic people are concerned about how their words will be interpreted by other people, and they try to avoid hurting anyone's feelings. For example, if you've been asked for your opinion on her and she says, "I've never seen the ugliest thing you've ever seen," you might say, "and hurting your friend's feelings is not a good thing." Instead, something positive like, "I can see you've put a lot of time and effort into it. I'm impressed."

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People enjoy hearing encouragement and praise, but most don't like to be told what to do, so make a habit of not giving advice. Acknowledge the person's emotions, moods, and concerns, and say "I'm sorry to hear that," if it's appropriate. Ask questions only if necessary, say the person's name often, and remember to use an appropriate tone of voice. If a person is sad, soothe her/him, but if s/he is happy, put some joy in your voice!

When it comes to listening carefully, a lot of us have a fatal flaw—we spend time thinking about what we're going to say while someone is talking!

That is definitely the wrong thing to do, and it's highly disrespectful, too.

How can you understand what a person is feeling if you aren't paying attention in the first place?