

Emotional Intelligence Coaching: Why Leaders Need Empathy and Four Tips for Improving It

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“Empathy depends largely on one’s own ability to experience and identify emotions.”

Empathy is simply a skill that allows you to see and experience the world from another person’s perspective.

~The EQ Edge (Steven Stein, PhD & Howard Book, MD)

Empathy is a way to understand the emotional experience of someone else. A leader uses empathy to build relationships with employees. Colleagues who empathize with each other improve their work environment by building trust, respect and mutual understanding. How would a customer’s experience with your organization benefit from an empathetic customer service or accounts payable representative? How might a team reduce conflict and become more productive by using empathy?

Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

Empathy is an important component of Emotional Intelligence (EI)—a set of emotional and social skills that influence the way people perceive and express themselves, develop and maintain social relationships, cope with challenges and use emotional information in effective and meaningful ways.

Empathy (see Model) is a Subscale of the EQ-i 2.0—a scientifically-validated assessment that is proven to measure the interaction between a person and the environment he/she operates in. Assessing and evaluating Emotional Intelligence allows HR and OD consultants, coaches and other EQ-i 2.0 certified professionals to create targeted EI development programs for leaders and teams that will improve performance, create better interpersonal interactions, increase leadership potential and more.

Why Empathy Is Important

When it comes to empathy, we know people share and respond to emotional needs to varying degrees. As a leader or a member of a workgroup or team, you already know something about the people you work with. Some are easy to read and others are more difficult. Some share their feelings and others keep things in. One co-worker might express empathy easily while another might be quite inept. As with any skill, developing empathy is a process—a process that is often enhanced by the engagement of a professional coach or trainer. The following quotation offers sound coaching advice:

A basic guideline . . . is to not invalidate [someone’s] feelings by belittling, diminishing, rejecting, judging, or ignoring them. Even just a simple acknowledgment without any real empathy is much better than totally ignoring someone’s feelings (<http://eqi.org/empathy.htm>).

Empathy depends largely on one’s own ability to experience and identify emotions. This is how we learn to identify emotions in others. It would be helpful



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About the Author

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if people would just tell us what's going on. Unfortunately most of the time, we must rely on their body language, facial expressions and other non-verbal cues to determine their emotional state and whether expressing empathy is appropriate.

Among those with an equal level of innate Emotional Intelligence, the person who has actually experienced the widest range and variety of feelings is the one who is most able to empathize with the greatest number of people from all walks of life (<http://eqi.org/empathy.htm>).

Some people seem to be more in tune to the emotions of those around them. If you or other team members aren't one of these people, you can improve the skill of empathy using the coaching tips below. We encourage people to start where they are and take small steps until it gets easier. It is well worth the effort.

Coaching Tips to Improve Empathy

1) Start With The Golden Rule. “Treat others the way you would like to be treated” or as one writer said, “Treat others the way they would like to be treated.” Though technically not empathy, think of the Golden Rule as a warm-up exercise. Remember to be nice. Good manners and kindness are always important in relationship building. Caleb Gardner, MD, cautions us to be authentic in our expressions of empathy: “The only thing worse than not having it (empathy) is being insincere about it.”

2) Improve Awareness. Awareness is a key part of EI. Take time to actually notice the people you work with. Fine tune your ‘social radar’ to pick up on

others' emotions. Learn to read their non-verbal cues. Pay particular attention to people who seem to be comfortable expressing empathy. You can learn a lot just by observing.

3) Be a Good Listener. Do you ever mentally rehearse your next comment when someone else is talking, waiting for your turn? Step outside yourself the next time and really listen to what the other person is saying—especially if you don't agree with them. Try to see why their perspective might be important to them. This can be especially helpful if you must collaborate on a divisive issue. Tuning someone out because you don't agree is a missed opportunity.

4) Practice. Use the empathy you have instead of avoiding opportunities to develop this skill. Practice recognizing and identifying others' and your own emotions. You will learn when and how to respond appropriately over time. Any skill can be improved with effort. When you read or watch a movie, notice which characters use empathy and how they affect other characters. Notice how the author or director uses these emotional encounters to draw you in to the story.

Whether your organization is considering Emotional Intelligence training and development or is already implementing EI concepts, remember that change takes time and patience. Simply making people aware of EI and the skills it comprises is a good first step. Empathy is one of the most underused and misunderstood dimensions of Emotional Intelligence. Being empathetic does not come easily to everyone. Fortunately, with practice and patience most people can improve this skill. Encourage leaders and employees to take initiative and develop the important EI skill Empathy.

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