



Leaders Need Empathy—Here's Why Plus, Practical Tips to Improve

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Emotions are catching! People are connected to each other directly as well as indirectly in many degrees of separation. Our first-hand behavior with one another impacts not only that relationship but many other relationships, too. That's why empathy is so important to the success of leaders, teams and organizations.

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 while 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.

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 representative? How might a team reduce conflict and become more productive by using empathy more effectively?

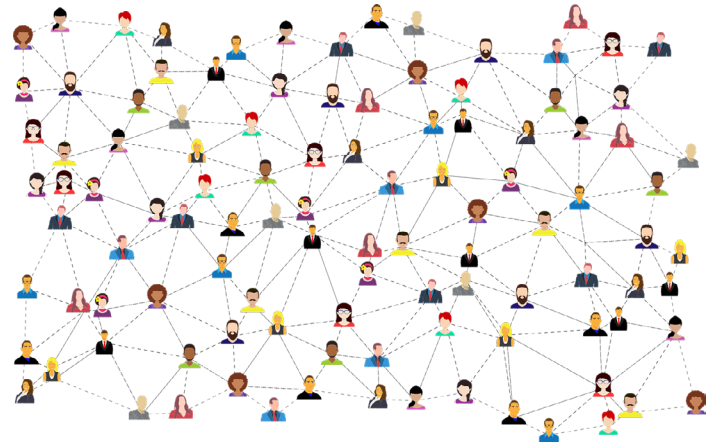
Some people seem to be more in tune with the emotions of those around them. If you or other team members aren't one of these people, you can improve the skill of empathy using the coaching tips below. We encourage people to start where they are and take small steps until it gets easier. It is well worth the effort. Remember, our first-person interactions impact many other relationships in an interconnected, exponential way!

Coaching Tips to Improve Empathy

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."

Improve Awareness. Awareness is a key part of expressing empathy. 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.

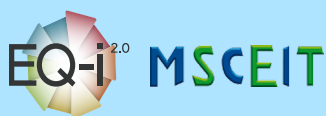


Be a Good Listener. Do you ever mentally rehearse your next comment when someone else is talking, waiting for your turn? Step outside yourself the next time and really listen to what the other person is saying—especially if you don't agree with them. Try to see why their perspective might be important 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.

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 into the story.

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