



Unlocking the Potential in Relationships

The right side of your brain. That's where neurologists say the capacity for empathy resides. And, empathy, it appears, is the key to building long-lasting, powerful and solid relationships.

Empathy is described as the ability to recognize and understand another's situation, feelings, concerns and motives. Often described colloquially as: "putting yourself in the other person's shoes" or "seeing things through someone else's eyes". It's NOT walking on eggshells, being "soft" or simply placating someone. Empathy creates bonds of trust; it gives us insights into what others may be feeling or thinking; it helps us understand how or why others are reacting to situations; it sharpens our judgment and informs our decisions.

Think of empathy as a type of research. It's paying attention at a deeper level. It's using skills of perception to be able to read between the lines for cues of an individual's unspoken priorities, fears, hopes and biases. Oftentimes, it's what's underneath what's being said that is the full story. Knowing this can transform your decision-making because you'll have a more complete picture of an issue or dynamic.

The Power of Empathy in Business

Among all the skills to be an adept business professional, "empathy" might not have made your personal top ten list. Yet, we readily agree that relationships are the cornerstone of our business. This is true internally with employees and colleagues and externally with clients, project teams, etc. Relationships drive our business. Business dynamics are changing. The way we communicate is changing.

With the increase in competition and the speed in which we live and work, empathy's role in building connections is more critical than ever. In your marketing efforts, what is going to truly differentiate you from the pack? How well do you know your client's, or potential client's, world? What keeps them up at night? You have to make their business your business – on an individual and organizational level. The deeper you understand your client's challenges, obstacles, fears and desires, the better you can serve them.

With leaner staffing resources, companies have increased the workload to existing employees. How well do you understand what your employees are experiencing – professionally and personally? Digging beyond the surface can open up conversations that deliver volumes; and can be key in preventing burnout and retaining talented employees.



Empathetic leadership (no matter what your role is in the company), can bring new solutions to old problems, generate new thinking, get to the root cause of issues and help build a robust culture. Getting to know people at this level, and holding this information with care, has the capacity to create lasting, authentic bonds.

What's your empathetic skill level?

How do you show up on the empathetic scale? Generally, while often armed with good intentions, we gloss over conversations. We listen only at the surface, or make assumptions about what we hear without going deeper. Why? True empathy requires courage, skill and time. Courage because we might unearth something uncomfortable and because often people are mirrors of our own thoughts and feelings. It takes a new skill to ask questions in earnest, with the intent of truly understanding someone. Stephen Covey captures it beautifully, *"Seek first to understand, then to be understood."* Bringing a genuine curiosity and an aptitude for learning contributes to the exchange as well. Who knows, you might just find that you discover something new when you practice being empathetic. It also takes time and patience to be present in a conversation.

Who has time and energy for empathy?!

As I observe the fast-paced world of many companies and business executives, it appears there's barely enough time and energy to execute the day-to-day operations. You might be thinking, *"I'm already at capacity, I don't have time or energy to be empathetic!"* This is blinders on, short-term thinking. Building an empathetic culture brings transparency to an organization. People report having a bit of burden removed when they feel understood, opening up all kinds of possibilities in innovation, achievements and performance.

Take the K Communications Challenge:

Ready to embrace being more empathetic? Practice these behaviors with the important people in your life – at home, the office, on the job site, or in your client's world.

1. **Listen.** Listen with your ears, eyes and heart. Pay attention to others' body language (it may conflict with what they are saying, giving you an opening to inquire further), listen to their tone of voice, to the hidden emotions behind what they are saying to you, and to the context. You should be using your ears at least twice as much as your mouth!



2. **Don't interrupt.** Don't dismiss their concerns offhand. Don't rush to give advice. Don't change the subject. Allow them to pace the conversation. In that moment, you are there for them. Put aside your own agenda.
3. **Be fully present.** Avoid the temptation to check your email, look at your watch or take phone calls when a direct report drops into your office to talk to you.
4. **Smile.** A warm, genuine smile creates an atmosphere of support.
5. **Encourage people** when they speak up in meetings. When you boost people's confidence you invite real conversations that result in better solutions.
6. **Give genuine and specific recognition and praise.** Acknowledgement is a sign of respect. Pay attention to what people are doing and catch them doing the right things.
7. **Take a personal interest in people.** Show people that you care, and genuine curiosity about their lives. Seek to know them at a deeper level – passions, challenges, aspirations, etc.

Empathy is an emotional and thinking muscle that becomes stronger the more we exercise it. Deepen your approach to building relationships and you'll transform your results.

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