

Empathy in the Workplace



Empathy is crucial to communication. Empathy can be contrasted with sympathy. Where empathy is more about a mental understanding of another person's circumstances, sympathy is more about feeling as they do about something. It is easy to act from sympathy rather than empathy, and to make mistakes. Suppose someone who reports to you says he is fed up with being in an open plan office as he finds it distracting. If you are used to acting from sympathy and have no sympathy for this view, you may just say that he needs to get on with it. But if his work is being affected, it would be better to respond with empathy: What is the issue? *Could* his desk be changed? Are there other factors? You may discover that he is stressed and needs more support than his initial concern suggested.

Tips for empathy

- Learn to separate how you feel from how you think about a situation or a conversation. Both are important but empathy requires understanding as well as feeling.
- Rather than reach a quick conclusion, ask some questions such as 'What have you done so far about this issue?' or 'Is this the main issue or are other things disturbing you too?' or 'I'm glad you've raised this. I wonder why you've only raised it now, what has caused you to come forward?' These questions will add to your understanding while stopping your feelings getting in the way.

Good practice with questioning

Asking questions involves the right words, tone and pace. For people issues (as opposed to task), open questions which explore a concern are generally more helpful than closed questions that invite a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Open questions typically start with 'how', 'what', or 'why'. However, taking account of the words is only the first step. It is important to use the right tone and pace. Suppose I ask 'Why have you come to see me?' If my tone is one of annoyance, or sympathy, or guilt, your response will be different in each case. If my pace is rushed, or definite, or gentle, your response will also differ. In coaching, questions are primarily used for understanding so are generally better when open, using a neutral but interested tone, and a measured pace.

Tips for questioning when coaching

- Remind yourself to relax, focus on the person and work from empathy. This will immediately set the tone for your questions.
- Be willing to explore an issue beyond what is immediately said. 'How do you normally deal with issues like this one?' or 'How do team members respond to you when you raise your concerns?' are ways of moving the focus beyond the immediate issue and helping someone to gain a clearer view of their situation.