

# Empathy Is an Essential Leadership Skill

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- Empathy is caring about people as human beings.
- Empathy is a superpower that makes us see — and feel — what most people can't.
- Empathy is more than a soft-skill — it's a meta-skill. It amplifies other skills making us more powerful to understand other people's needs. Empathy is being in sync with others.

This is an intro guide to everything empathy. What is it? How to become more empathetic? Why empathy is good for leaders? And more.

## Empathy — Frequently Asked Questions

### What is empathy?

Some experts define empathy as the capacity to a) be affected by and share the emotional state of another, b) assess the reasons for the other's state, and c) identify with the other, adopting his or her perspective.

The word empathy was inspired by the German aesthetic term *Einfühlung*, meaning "feeling into." As Walt Whitman said, "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels. I myself become the wounded person."

Empathy is more than putting yourself in another's shoes. It's genuinely grasping what others are going through. It's such an essential human skill that even babies exhibit it, reacting to the facial expressions of adults. Experts still disagree on the breadth and depth of empathy. Is it feeling for others? Feeling as others feel? Or understanding others?

### Why is empathy so important?

Empathy is a vital ingredient for building intimacy in relationships. According to Robin Stern, associate director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. "When someone feels seen and heard by you, they begin to trust you." Empathy is crucial because it helps us understand how others feel so that we can respond appropriately to the situation.

Increasing empathy will help you:

- Treat the people the way they want to be treated
- Understand people's unique needs
- Resolve conflict by integrating diverse perspectives
- Build trust and collaboration
- Focus on understanding rather than silencing or attacking those who think differently

### What is the difference between empathy and sympathy?

The terms *empathy* and *sympathy* are often confused. Both words deal with the relationship you have with the feelings and experiences of another person.

Both words have roots in the Greek term *páthos* meaning “suffering, feeling.” *Sympathy* is primarily used to convey commiseration, pity, or feelings of sorrow for someone else who is experiencing misfortune. *Empathy* had come to be used in a broader way than it was when it was first introduced; *Sympathy* caring about other’s hardship — we feel pity or sorrow. *Empathy* is a level deeper — we feel their pain.

## Does empathy require walking in someone else’s shoes?

Not necessarily. We usually refer to empathy as ‘walking in someone else’s shoes.’ The assumption is that, before judging someone, we must understand their experiences, feelings, and challenges.

However, feeling exactly what others feel is impossible. The worst thing we can tell someone is, “I feel what you feel.” Being empathetic is feeling the experience that someone is going through. Pain is personal. We cannot assume to feel as they do. By trying to connect to their struggles, we become in sync with them.

## Why is empathy the social glue?

Empathy is the ability to see and connect with others *because* they are human. People are kinder to those they view as human beings. Empathy is the social glue that brings us together. We see humankind as our extended family.

As empathy researcher Sara Konrath said:

*“To me, that’s the basic glue. It’s so rewarding to connect with human beings. Everything we know as psychologists tell us it’s the most wonderful thing.”*

## What are the three types of empathy?

There are three kinds of empathy: Emotional, Cognitive, and Compassionate.

Most people associate empathy with feeling what other people feel — especially their pain. That’s *Emotional Empathy*; it is activated by mirror neurons. Neuroscientists discovered in the early 1990s that specific brain cells become active when someone is suffering. They help us feel others’ pain — that’s why they are called ‘mirror neurons.’

*Cognitive Empathy*, on the other side, is about understanding people — it doesn’t require to suffer the way they do. This is also called ‘perspective taking’ — it’s an effort to understand how other people behave, think, or feel. Some experts believe both *Emotional* and *Cognitive* Empathy is part of the same — “true empathy” integrates both. However, research shows that the human brain responds differently when either is activated.

There’s a third type called *Compassionate Empathy*, where you feel concern about another’s suffering, but from more of a distance. You feel compelled to act and help the person in need.

Brain imaging studies of Buddhists while meditating on contemplative compassion showed increased activation of the brain’s *empathy circuit*.

Summarizing, you can think it, feel it, or act by empathy.

## How do we show empathy?

### Listen. Listen. Listen

**Open up.** Trust is a two-way street, but someone has to take the first step. By sharing your own stories and emotions, you make it easier for other people to share theirs.

**Withhold judgment.** To gain a more profound understanding of someone's perspective, you have to put yours aside. Empty your cup and make room for other people's feelings.

**Volunteer.** Helping people in need after a hurricane or accident is an effective way to experience their pain firsthand. Volunteering promotes an understanding of the needs of the community. It allows us to learn more about people we don't meet in our everyday life.

**Walk in other people's shoes. Literally.** Role-playing is vital to feeling the pain firsthand. When talking to a toddler, lower your posture to stand eye to eye — see how things change. Walk blindfolded for 15 minutes or using only one leg.

I once experienced being homeless for a day — it changed my perspective. Homeless people want to be seen, not just helped.

## Why is empathy good for leaders?

Studies show that empathy is the most significant leadership skill needed today.

As Richard S. Wellins, SVP of DDI, explains, "Being able to listen and respond with empathy is overwhelmingly the one interaction skill that outshines all other skills."

20% of employers now offer empathy training. Even the U.S. Army includes empathy in its Army Field Manual on Leader Development. It is considered essential for competent leadership.

Empathy is a crucial factor in building strong work relationships.

Research shows that managers who show more empathy toward direct reports are viewed as better performers by their bosses. Also, high empathy assessment by direct subordinates' correlates to higher ratings from one's boss.

Regardless of job titles or seniority, we are all human beings. Empathy is a powerful tool to understand, relate, and connect with other people. It's crucial for collaboration.

Empathy has become a powerful tool to understand customer too. Human-Centered Design uses Empathy research to understand the users better — not just what they want but also how they think and feel.

## How can I become a more empathetic leader?

### **Become a better listener.**

Active listening is the most vital skill to increase empathy. To understand others, we must let their stories flow, rather than try to impose our views or emotions.

Start by not interrupting. Pay attention, take notes, and ask questions to show you care.

### **Take the back seat.**

Let the other person drive. Don't. Create a force the pace or focus. Follow their lead. Avoid judging or criticizing your employees for what they say safe space for trust and open communication.

### **Be fully present.**

Remove distractions. Make sure you are not checking the time or your phone when someone is sharing their struggles. Focus all your energy on being there. Make sure your mind is where your body is.

### **Try to understand their perspective.**

Let go of right-and-wrong. Don't use your beliefs or thoughts to judge what the other person is telling you. Focus on understanding their perspective.

If you are joining a new team, spend time learning about them and how they work before sharing how you like to work.

### **Create regular touchpoints.**

Building trust and rapport takes time. Also, monitor how issues are evolving. Make sure people feel that you are always ready to listen. Not just once.

### **Don't give unsolicited advice.**

Some people are looking for help. Others just want to be listened to. Many people gain clarity while sharing their issues.

Avoid the temptation to save the day. Don't provide advice unless someone asks for it.

Instead ask, "What do you need from me? How can I help you?"

### **Encourage quiet voices.**

There's always a few people who take over meetings. Encourage participation by providing quiet voices the opportunity to speak up.

Make sure everyone gets their turn to share their feelings or thoughts. Make it a point to encourage every employee to be part of the conversation.

### **Get a coach.**

Becoming more empathetic is something that we can all learn and develop. An external coach can help you and your team become more aware. And to increase listening skills.

Also, they can provide a safe space and actionable tools for developing empathy across the whole group.

### **Lead with questions.**

Wise leaders embrace intellectual humility. They welcome their vulnerable side — they want to seek the truth, not to be right.

Intellectual Humility is about being obsessively curious. Instead of having all the answers, you are open to listening to what your team has to say.

## What is the empathy deficit?

Self-reported empathy in America has declined dramatically in the past three decades.

Barack Obama claims that the *empathy deficit* is a more pressing political problem for America than the federal deficit.

“The world doesn’t revolve around you,” the former U.S. president told graduates. He encouraged them to cultivate empathy and compassion.

According to a study, the ability to think about how someone else might feel is declining. But even more troubling is the drop-off of people’s ability to exhibit an emotional response to someone else’s distress.

Psychologist Douglas LaBier believes that many people suffer from what he calls the *Empathy Deficit Disorder (EDD)*. He believes this phenomenon is a consequence of vanity and materialism.

EDD means the inability to step outside yourself and tune in to what other people experience. Lack of empathy not only creates misunderstandings; it divides people just for thinking differently.

As LaBier explains, people equate what they have with who they are. They live under the delusion of being completely self-sufficient — that’s a killer for empathy.

What does empathy fatigue mean?

Empathy fatigue is a state of psychological, emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and occupational exhaustion that affects counselors and caregivers.

Feeling someone else’s pain can take a toll on us. Some people also refer to it as *compassion fatigue*.

This condition affects those who work directly with victims of disasters, trauma, or illness, especially in the health care industry. But other occupations such as lawyers, firefighters, and teachers can experience it as well.

Symptoms can include stress and anxiety, hopelessness, lack of sleep, and nightmares. It creates a pervasive negative attitude that harms productivity, focus, and self-confidence.

What are the disadvantages of empathy?

Empathy is not a universally positive emotional response. Intimate understanding of another’s experience can be used to manipulate and hurt them.

Yale psychologist Paul Bloom takes unlikely aim at empathy. In his book *Against Empathy*, he explains that empathic responses can lead to in-group bias. We end valuing those who look, sound, and act like us.

## Bloom provides five reasons why we should be less empathetic.

1. Bias: it's easier to empathize with loved ones or close friends.
2. Moral lens: empathy can cloud our actions, impeding us from making the right choices.
3. Too much empathy becomes personal. Feeling too much of your partner's pain can lead to relationship asymmetries.
4. Empathy can become exhausting, especially for caregivers.
5. People in pain want you to be there with them, not to feel their pain.

Like everything, the secret lies in finding balance.