

How to Build Empathy in the Workplace

Building stronger teams with human connection



- Listen first, speak second.
 - A term that is often thrown out that pertains to this one is active listening. And this goes back to making sure your people feel seen and heard on a human level. Too often, especially as bosses and managers, we think we have to have all of the answers or we jump in to try to "fix" things for our people. When really, in many cases, if we just take a pause and hear them out we get to a far better place much more quickly.
 - So how do we do this? First, zip it. Do not speak until the person is finished speaking. Show them that you are listening. Make eye contact. Sit still/do not fidget. Do not be distracted by what else is going on outside the room. Nod your head and offer an 'mm-hmm' every now and then.
 - Do NOT stop listening/be ready to jump in and speak. We all know what this looks like- you are chomping at the bit for them to just hurry up and finish so that you can offer your moment of brilliance.
 - Share stories of relatability but don't make it about you. Ask "how can I help?"
- Seek to know your staff on a personal level.
 - This is maybe one of the things that the pandemic taught us the most, and that is that we all need human connection and this includes with the people that we work with and as a result spend some much time with. The way to get the best out of your team members is to treat them as a whole person. We are not robots.
 - You do not need to be best friends with your staff. But you should know what is important to them and what makes them tick. Learn the names of their significant others and kids. Ask them how they spend their weekends. Know where they like to vacation. Take an active interest beyond just the job they do for you. This helps them feel like you care about them.
 - Make sure it is AUTHENTIC. If you try to phone it in/check boxes, this will have the opposite effect. We are not saying you do this with an agenda in mind on your end. That is the OPPOSITE of empathy.
- Respect your employees by having the tough conversations.
 - Confrontation is a tricky thing- some of us are better at it than others. But no one really likes it. It is really important to effectiveness and productivity at work, and to having a highly functioning team. One of the ways to make it easier is by treating your employees with empathy and having the conversations in a timely manner so that any issues don't get "too big".
 - If you have been practicing active listening and you have gotten to know your employees on a personal level, this should make these conversations easier because the employee feels like they have you in their corner. Give the feedback directly, but respectfully, and then decide what you are going to do about it. Come up with a plan to address it together. Make sure you hear the other party out and/or give them time to come back after they have had time to process to continue the conversation with you.
 - One of the things about tough conversations is that people hurry through to get them done, pat themselves on the back, and then don't revisit/hear the other party out. This is not an empathetic approach.
 - People pick up on when things are not going well and it causes stress and anxiety. Don't put them through that. We are big fans of immediate feedback but not in front of other people. Keep an ongoing loop of communication.
 - Kindness is not weakness. Flex as much as possible, but don't break. People get caught up about "setting precedent". If I let one person WFH on Fridays, then I have to let everyone. This is where you need to be very clear that you will try and do what's best for the person and the business but that may not look the same for everyone.
- Ask for feedback and mean it. Then do something about it.
 - You might be a super empathetic person just by nature- if so, good for you. However, none of us are perfect. We can think we are doing an amazing job, but if we do not receive feedback on the other side, how can we ever be certain? If there is an ongoing feedback loop, this is a great way to get authentic feedback on how you are doing. I constantly ask my teams and our clients: "Is this helpful? Are there things we can be doing better? You know we are 'forthright' for a reason- do not hold back your thoughts." It is amazing when you open the door how much relief it gives people on the other side. And it can be SO helpful for you to continue on your journey to rise as an empathetic leader.
 - If you ask for feedback, make sure you do something about it. Even if your "doing" is to say you spent time with the feedback but you do not feel it was relevant. Make sure this is really true. Nothing is worse than a person taking the time to give feedback just to have it go nowhere/never be addressed. Opposite of an empathic approach.
 - You do not need to and should not take every piece of feedback and action against it- this will erode your personal brand and your focus and make you show up in all kinds of inauthentic ways. This is not what we are suggesting here. You do need to consider what was said, who it came from, and ultimately what you are going to do with it. Are there themes that keep coming up? You should probably address those. Are a group of people saying the same thing to you repeatedly? Might want to get on top of that one.