

Building Higher Trust 122 Show Empathy

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Empathy is a critical ingredient for building trust. When leaders feel the emotions of others, it leads to sound decisions. People recognize that their situation was factored into the equation. Their feelings were part of the analysis.

Some confusion about empathy

Sometimes people confuse the concept of empathy with sympathy. Here are the distinctions between the two concepts.

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. Those feelings can be positive or negative. They can include confusion and frustration. Empathy involves putting yourself in someone else's shoes and feeling what they are feeling. It requires a deep level of emotional intelligence. It can help people build connections and relationships with others.

Sympathy, on the other hand, is a feeling of pity or sorrow for someone else's situation. While sympathy involves recognizing someone else's pain, it does not necessarily involve feeling that pain yourself, although it can. Sympathy is more about acknowledging someone else's feelings without necessarily experiencing them firsthand.

Daniel Goleman (Father of Emotional Intelligence) added some detail

He said that there are three stages of empathy.

Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another person's perspective. It's being able to see things from their point of view.

Emotional empathy is the ability to feel another person's emotions. When you're emotionally empathetic, you can feel what the other person is feeling—joy, pain, love, fear, etc.

Somatic empathy is the ability to feel another person's physical sensations. This type of empathy is often seen in medical professionals. They can sense what might be wrong with a patient just by looking at them or touching them lightly.

How is all this related to trust?

The subtle distinctions between empathy and sympathy can get complex. Let's see if I can give a more simplified distinction of the difference between the two concepts.

With sympathy, we can relate to another person's pain and maybe even feel it ourselves in some situations. Sympathy is always about negative things that are going on. We cringe when we see another person put her hand on the hot burner of a stove.

Empathy is all about relating to what is going on within another person, both positive and negative. It is a more balanced concept. I believe that is why empathy is a more reliable predictor of trust. Leaders who demonstrate empathy are really creating trust along the way. It is a way of demonstrating care.

Additional benefits of showing empathy

Empathy has many benefits that go beyond enhancing trust between people. These include:

- Having more realistic expectations and not pressuring people
- Enhanced communication and care in conversations
- Higher Emotional Intelligence, where people feel heard and understood
- Greater Psychological safety where people can be candid about their feelings without fear
- Improved problem-solving and more robust decisions

Conclusion

Showing empathy is an excellent way to reduce problems between people. Practice using more empathy in all your relationships. It will help build trust.

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