



## Understanding Empathy and Sympathy

Being empathetic (also called “empathic”) means *seeing things through someone else’s eyes* or *putting yourself in another person’s shoes* and identifying with what the person is feeling (based on their statements, tone of voice, facial expression, body language, etc.).

Empathy is essential for effective understanding, communication and relationship-building in the workplace, and is therefore a core aspect of effective leadership.

- Empathy helps us build connections with workers and other colleagues.
- Empathy can allow us to establish trust in relationships.
- Empathy helps us understand and anticipate workers’ behaviours.
- Empathy supports us in making better decisions.

Empathy can be positively related to job performance. Managers who are more empathetic may be considered better performers in their job. Empathy helps create the strong interpersonal bonds that are important to help ensure the success of the entire team. Empathetic managers can best support distressed workers. Managers low in empathy (especially in times of uncertainty or crisis) may be seen as indifferent, uncaring and inauthentic, which can make workers less cooperative and less communicative.

The terms “**empathy**” and “**sympathy**” are often used interchangeably, but there are important differences. Empathy involves *sharing* another person’s emotional experience and is based on an *unspoken understanding*: we can co-experience and relate to the emotions of another person without necessarily having to directly communicate this to them. Sympathy, on the other hand, implies supportive feelings and offerings: we offer assistance and love, for example, by telling another person how sorry we feel for them. We may feel genuinely sorry, but this does not mean we necessarily understand what they are going through.

	<b>Empathy</b>	<b>Sympathy</b>
Brief Definition	Empathy is about <i>feelings</i> : we co-experience the emotions of a person with whom we connect.	Sympathy is about <i>support/care</i> : we feel sorry or feel pity for someone.
Example	<i>“I can imagine you must be feeling so many things – sadness, frustration, anger – since you lost your mother.”</i>	<i>“I’m so sorry to hear about the loss of your mother. My thoughts are with you.”</i>



Sometimes when we think we are being empathetic, we are actually being sympathetic. Unfortunately, offers of *sympathy* do not always feel helpful to distressed workers (sympathy alone can sometimes seem shallow and lacking in emotional feeling). Simply expressing sympathetic sentiments doesn't usually make a worker feel better in any way. To the contrary, it could make them feel worse.

*Empathy*, in contrast, more deeply acknowledges the existence of a worker's suffering. We relate to the worker's experience, which helps them feel emotionally connected and understood.

### Making Empathetic Statements

Empathetic statements can *clarify* and *reinforce* the feelings a worker is experiencing. Several verbal and non-verbal communication techniques can be useful: paraphrasing, rephrasing, self-disclosure, and appropriate body language. Here are some examples of empathetic statements:

- To someone who is feeling overloaded with work:
  - o *"I can imagine you may be feeling stressed about your current workload. Let me see what we can do to make things feel more manageable..."*
- To someone who is in a conflict with a co-worker:
  - o *"It seems that you are upset by the situation; I would like to talk about this and see what can be done to improve the situation..."*
- To someone who was forced to change departments:
  - o *"I can imagine you may be feeling the decision was unfair. That sounds like something I went through..."*
- To someone who was just laid off due to reorganization.
  - o *"This must be very upsetting news for you. I'm committed to helping you..."*

A manager who is skillful at empathizing tends to:

- make others feel respected
- be observant of signs of overwork in employees
- be interested in the needs, goals and intentions of others
- be eager to support an employee with personal problems
- express compassion when someone reveals a personal loss.