



Now is the Age of Empathy

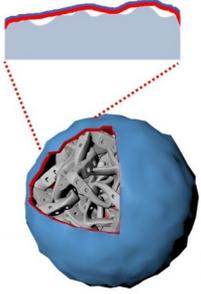


No one would argue against the **value of empathy**. Yet, most would agree it is often in short supply. And while, from an organizational or societal perspective, we could always use more of it, **the need is greater than ever**. That is why now is the **Age of Empathy**. Let me tell you why, why that matters to you as a professional and human being, and how you can be more empathetic today.

I believe this is the Age of Empathy because the need for empathy is so clearly evident. This gives us an opportunity to build our empathy skills into new productive habits that will serve us personally and professionally for the rest of our lives.

The Needs for Empathy (Why?)

I've already said that in most circles, there is already a lack of sufficient empathy between people. So why are the needs even higher now?



People are polarized. Everyone has an opinion about most things. Now, for a variety of reasons, people are tribalizing around their opinions. This leads to one of two extremes – not saying anything, or sharing their opinions loudly and proudly.

Either way, the chances for real dialogue and greater understanding are reduced. Empathy can create greater respect and trust, even if your opinions don't match, or aren't changed by the conversation.



People are hurting. People are hurting personally, interpersonally, socially, and economically. Regardless of the cause of the hurt, there are as many possible causes today as you can likely remember. When we are hurt, stressed, sad, or lonely, we need others to hear us and help us deal with those realities. Empathy is the answer to both help in the short term and to build the relationships with those who are hurting.



People have different experiences and needs. While we are all

dealing with a pandemic, lockdowns, masks, and more, not everyone is having the same experience. Here is a simple example in the workplace. Some team members are working and living alone. Others have school-age children that they may need to be teaching while they work. Some have elderly parents living with them or nearby, some have kids, but they don't need additional supervision. All of these people are trying to work productively as they deal with their specific situations. While we can commiserate at that high level, real empathy comes from understanding someone's specific situation.



People are unsure about the future. While we can never foresee the future, it is easy to understand why people think the future is hazier than ever. This lack of certainty leads to stress, anxiety, and fear, which points again to the need for greater empathy.

What You Can Do Now

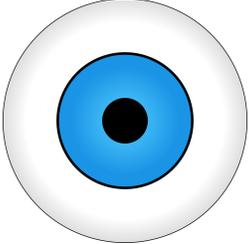
(What?)

Now that you see the heightened need, here are some specific ways you can change course and be more empathetic in any situation. Pick a part of your life (as a leader, team member, parent, spouse) and start to practice these ideas immediately

<p>Recognize the need. Hopefully, this article points you to the need, but think about the people around you. What is driving their need for your empathy,</p>	<p>Listen more. We can't be empathetic without listening. We need to listen more and listen more effectively. This advice is simple. And while we know how to be effective listeners, we don't do it consciously or consistently enough. Rather than feeling guilty because you haven't been doing it, choose to start today.</p>
<p>Stop assuming and start asking. When we assume we know how people feel or what they are thinking, we don't ask. For example, just because you have a team member (or client) that you know lives alone, do you assume how they are doing during a lockdown, or do you ask them? Even if your assumption is correct, the empathy and relationship building starts with the asking – and isn't about proving your assumptions right anyway.</p>	<p>Acknowledge, don't judge. This is a big one. Maybe your situation is different. Perhaps you feel differently. Maybe you think they are wrong or shouldn't feel the way they do. Perhaps you aren't sure how to respond to whatever they say. None of that matters. Empathy comes from us understanding where the other person is, and judgement has no place in that equation. Acknowledge their feelings. Don't judge or even try to solve anything for them. Focus on making sure they know they have been heard.</p>
<p>Grant people grace. Once you recognize their stress, anxiety, or struggle, grant them some grace. Now you know what they are dealing with, and so their behaviors, decisions, and results may make more sense to you. That gives you the chance to grant some grace, be patient and understanding. This doesn't mean relaxing the standards forever, but for today, maybe a different approach might be needed or appreciated. This is empathy in action.</p>	<p>Focus on feelings first. In a work or client situation, especially if you are working remotely from others, the tendency is to be tactical and efficient, making every conversation about the tasks and goals. If you want to create opportunities to build empathy, you must overcome that urge and begin conversations talking about how people are doing – their thoughts and feelings first before diving into the task at hand. When you start there, you will have a better chance and more opportunities to apply the other ideas on this list.</p>

HOW? Practicing Empathy – The Five L’s

Empathy – understanding the feeling and emotions someone is feeling as a way to provide solace and support while building understanding and trust – is a critical leadership skill.

Lean in	Listen	Look
<p>You can't be empathetic at an emotional distance. Lean in physically and come closer emotionally too. Creating physical (when possible) and emotional closeness creates the possibility for empathy. Leaning in creates a sense of closeness, togetherness and intimacy that will help people feel safe enough to share.</p> 	<p>You can't be empathetic without listening, but you are listening for more than their situation, but for how they are feeling in response to and as a result of the situation. Remember that different people will respond to any situation differently. Knowing the facts doesn't create empathy. Listen to understand how people feel now and what they are seeing in their future.</p> 	<p>We communicate with far more than our words. Maintain focus on the other person, noticing their body language – both when it aligns with their words and when it doesn't. We can learn so much by simply slowing down to watch.</p> 

Let go	Learn	EMPATHY
<p>Empathy isn't about you and until you can let go of your perspective and judgment it is hard to be empathetic. There is a place for your input, ideas and insight – but that isn't empathy. As you listen and look, work to understand their reactions and feeling, not to “help” them by sharing yours. Now is the time to focus completely on them and to do that you must let go of your perspective so you can understand theirs.</p> 	<p>The practice of empathy is ultimately a practice of learning. In the moment you are learning how the other person feels and how they are responding to their world and situation. In the bigger picture though, as you reflect on the experience you are learning more about that person, humankind and your own views about the world.</p> 	<p>Empathy is a practice about the other person – until we can focus our attention and emotions on the other person, we are not able to be truly empathetic. When we do this, we are exhibiting selflessness. Empathy allows us to build trust and connection with others and serve them in important ways.</p>