

Additional Mystery Chapter

Skilled Empathy Techniques

Empathy demonstrates that you understand the other person's perspective, feelings, opinion, or story to their satisfaction. Those last three words are crucial: to their satisfaction. The question isn't simply have you understood what the other person is trying to express? The question is, does the other person feel understood? In other words, empathy isn't a feeling you have, it's something you *do* that leads to a feeling they have.

Empathy is so important throughout the conversation with your partner, that I want to share six powerful Empathy techniques you can use throughout the Four Steps: Open-ended questions, Deep listening, Expressions of Empathy, Encouragers, Interruptions, and Recaps.

Open-ended Questions

Open-ended questions can't be answered by *yes* or *no* or *three* or *a week from Tuesday*. Instead, you're looking for longer descriptions, explanations, and stories. One way to start an open-ended question is, "Tell me about...", as in "Tell me about what goes on in your weekly team meetings."

Another form of open-ended question is to repeat back the last few important words the person said as a question.

As a question?

Yes, as a question. Because repeating their exact words as a question encourages them to elaborate on them, using different words and often going deeper into the story or issue.

(See what I did there?)

Deep Listening

When I train coaches, their first assignment is to have a conversation with someone in which they attempt to "listen like that person has never been listened to before."

That means being fully present, not lost in thought, or reflexively checking your phone, or waiting for them to finish a sentence so you can respond, or rushing to get to the end of the conversation.

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It means flexing your curiosity muscle, and becoming fascinated with your conversation partner and what they're saying. It means holding your own thoughts, criticisms, rebuttals, and suggestions at arm's length as you continue to pay attention to your partner.

Here's a trick to deep listening: Actually listen deeply.

It's a skill you can develop, and it takes practice. It's a lot like meditation: you set an intention not to get distracted, and then every time you find your mind wandering, bring it back. In meditation, you bring it back to a point of focus like your breath, a mantra, or an image. In conversation, you bring it back to your partner's words and non-verbal forms of communication.

When I'm listening deeply, I'm not thinking or analyzing or judging. I know this because when my clients ask what I think of what they just said, I often don't have a ready answer. "I need a minute," I tell them, "because I wasn't thinking; I was just listening." Then, before replying, I'll sit in silence and think about what they've told me, and how I want to address it.

Of course, if you sit with your eyes closed, you might be listening deeply, or you might be fantasizing about dinner, or even snoozing. Skilled empathy is not only about listening deeply, but communicating your listening to your partner. One way to do this is with overt expressions of empathy.

Expressions of Empathy

Empathy is the glue that holds this entire process together. We used it in the approach, to obtain permission to help, and we stay empathic as they begin to share their story and situation. When they open up and start telling us about their problems, that can come with a large side helping of defensiveness. By showing that we understand their difficulties and perspectives, we can reduce this defensiveness and encourage them to let go of old justifications and excuses so they can see with new eyes.

As you'll remember, we express empathy by reflecting back what we observe and surmise about their emotions and state:

"It must have been painful not to get the promotion."

"You're frustrated that they don't trust you enough to share their complaints with you."

"I can see how angry that makes you."

These expressions of empathy serve many purposes, including building rapport and establishing yourself as a trusted ally rather than another critic.

And there's another purpose empathy serves: To "normalize" their thoughts and feelings.

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This is especially important since we are asking them to get detailed and concrete about actual experiences which, in some cases, will bring up shame. Remember, when people are struggling, they often feel shame that they aren't able to fix their situation and that shame blocks their change.

Because shame and accompanying emotions are not "acceptable" in most workplaces (and in many families), those emotions don't get expressed. This can lead people to feel different, and abnormal, like there's something wrong with them - a vicious shame spiral. If they aren't willing to feel those emotions at all, they often project them in the form of blame and criticism and judgment.

When you name emotions such as pain, frustration, sadness and anger without judgment or shock or surprise, but in a matter-of-fact manner, you send the message that those emotions are normal, and there's nothing wrong with feeling them. This reduces defensiveness, and opens the door to creativity and self reflection.

Throughout this process, empathize whenever you see, hear, or sense a strong emotion behind their words.

Encouragers

Encouragers are verbal and non-verbal messages that you're interested and attentive. That you care. Verbal encouragers include interjections like "Wow," "Yeah," and "That sounds like it was really hard." You're showing that you're fully there with them, that the story they're telling has your full attention. Encouragers can also nudge them to keep going: "Tell me more about that." Follow-up questions can encourage them to go deeper: "What were you feeling at that moment?"

You can also use non-verbal encouragers to get more information, like facial expressions, gestures, postures, sounds, and words that tell your partner you'd like them to keep talking. I'd give you a list, but the worst thing you can do is memorize a bunch of ways to simulate interest. Instead, just BE interested. When you are, you naturally do things like open your eyes wide, nod your head, lean toward them, and say "hmm" and "uh huh." Obviously, visual-only encouragers don't translate over the phone, or with a partner with visual impairments. So match your encouragers to the situation.

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Interruptions

You've probably been told that it's rude to interrupt someone who's speaking. I think it's ruder to let them keep talking when they're spinning their wheels, getting off-track, or if I'm confused about what they're saying. And the truth is, they won't mind being interrupted if they feel heard and cared for. In fact, they'll often be grateful. Done right, it actually shows that you're listening.

So how do you do it right? You can interrupt without breaking rapport as long as you interrupt with empathy, and for a good reason. One good reason is a curiosity-driven question. Another is to check your understanding of their perspective, by recapping what you've heard and asking if you got it right.

Sometimes I'll interject without recapping, being careful to avoid criticism and convey my support with an explanation:

Don't:

OMG, you've been talking non-stop for the past five minutes. Take a breath.

Do:

Can I pause you here because I have a question?

Let me interrupt you for a second, because I'm not clear about something.

Let me stop you there for a moment, to make sure I understand what I'm hearing.

Recaps

Listening deeply and asking questions with curiosity go a long way to showing that you care, but they don't guarantee understanding. The best way to make sure you and your partner are on the same page is to recap what they've just told you, and check if you've understood them.

Announcing that you understand what they're saying – without telling them *what* you understand – tells them that you just want to move on. It actually communicates to the other person that you *don't* understand what they're saying. Especially if you follow it with "But . . ."

Which is proven by the fact that, more often than not, right after you've told them, "I understand what you're saying," nine times out of ten they will repeat themselves. Without a recap, you're simply not believable. They don't know what you've heard so they don't trust it.

Rather than telling them that you understand, let them tell you.

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Communication is like a game of catch — it involves throwing and receiving. Unlike tossing a ball, it's often impossible to tell if the other person has “caught” our meaning. The way to demonstrate understanding is to recap what they've just said to you, and ask if you understand them correctly.

A simple recap formula goes like this: “What I hear you saying is... [recap]. Is that accurate?”

Other formats include:

“So you're saying that... [recap]. Did I understand correctly?”

“It sounds like what you're saying is... [recap]. Am I getting this right?”

If they tell you that you don't understand, don't ask them to repeat their story. They will, and probably in greater detail, and you still may not get it. Instead, Follow up with “What did I get wrong,” or “What did I miss?” You'll get the clarification you need while continuing to build rapport.

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