Empathy is a critical future-of-work skill that fosters connection and is linked to enhanced morale and team collaboration; anyone can build this skill with practice, motivation, and intention to get it right. However, misunderstandings are common about what empathy is, what it isn’t, and how to improve it. Researchers show that efforts to build empathy can backfire if done without considering how power dynamics, culture, and our own biases can stifle our ability to truly understand others’ perspectives.

Practice building your empathy skills in three ways—cognitively (head/thinking), emotionally (heart/feeling), and behaviorally (action/doing)—to form stronger bonds with team members, learn from others’ experiences, and foster an inclusive workplace where everyone can thrive.

**COGNITIVE EMPATHY**
Being able to see and understand another person's thoughts, emotions, and perspectives.

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<th>LACKING COGNITIVE EMPATHY</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>WHAT YOU THINK, SAY, OR DO</strong></td>
<td><strong>HOW IT’S NOT COGNITIVE EMPATHY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“THIS REMINDS ME OF WHAT OTHERS HAVE SAID ABOUT [____]; I KNOW THIS ALREADY.”</td>
<td>Assuming you already know someone’s thoughts, feelings, or opinions undermines your ability to learn from them and consider alternate viewpoints. Even worse, making assumptions can stifle innovation and perpetuate bias.</td>
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Open your mind to other peoples’ viewpoints and experiences and let go of your preconceptions. Don’t judge. Check in to ensure you are accurately understanding their perspectives.

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<td>“THIS IS HOW I WOULD HANDLE THINGS.”</td>
<td>Focusing on how you would respond in a certain situation is limiting and can be dismissive. Instead, try to understand their response to the situation. Even if you don’t necessarily agree, you’ll be able to move forward with greater clarity.</td>
<td>“I really appreciate you telling me about this; it sounds like it was [_______]. Is that accurate?”</td>
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Intentionally set aside how you would think, feel, or act in a similar situation to understand your colleague’s unique set of experiences, and how those shape their thoughts, feelings, and actions.
Sometimes we don’t know the “right” thing to say, and it may feel safer to say nothing at all. But shutting down the conversation or changing the subject when someone shares an emotionally charged experience can signal a lack of care and concern. By dismissing people’s lived experiences, you may fail to learn about the experiences of a group or community that is different from your own. You also may miss the opportunity to show up as an ally in support of members of your team. Just because you might not agree with their assessment of the situation (perhaps because you haven’t personally been targeted with discrimination) doesn’t mean it’s not important, real, or valid.

Focus on understanding the emotions being shared rather than trying to find the “right” answer or a solution to the situation. Being willing to admit you don’t have all the answers will build trust for further disclosures and deepen your connection.

If colleagues express fear or concern about a situation, allow yourself to share in these emotions. By doing so, you can foster a sense of psychological safety for others to do the same.
If you don’t give colleagues your full attention, you can’t match their body language, facial expressions, and vocal cues, which are essential to building rapport and showing that you respect and value them and care about what they have to say.12

People who are upset or experiencing challenging emotions are often the ones most in need of empathy, concern, and connection. Actively avoiding them is likely to heighten their feelings of isolation and disconnectedness.13

Think about the difference someone may have made when they reached out to you with care and concern during a challenging time. Use this memory to help you engage with others who may be struggling.

Be vulnerable. Create an open and trusting space for you and your colleagues to share emotions, especially negative emotions like fear or sadness. Ensure confidentiality and encourage discussion of topics that may be uncomfortable.11

Emotional empathy is not about trying to fix or take away an emotion—particularly a negative one—or feeling sorry for someone (sympathy), which evokes a sense of pity. It is about sharing, or feeling similarly to, your colleague’s emotional state to evoke a sense of care, connection, and appreciation for their emotions.

Actions that demonstrate a sense of empathy for others, such as communicating concern and understanding and matching body language.

WHAT YOU THINK, SAY, OR DO
“MULTITASKING DURING TEAM OR ONE-ON-ONE CHECK-INS.

WHAT TO THINK, SAY, OR DO INSTEAD
“Pay attention and listen to your colleagues, even in virtual workspaces, which is foundational to empathy.

WHAT TO THINK, SAY, OR DO INSTEAD
“I’m also feeling sad and worried hearing you describe that upsetting situation.”

WHAT YOU THINK, SAY, OR DO
“WHEN A COLLEAGUE SEEMS UPSET, YOU LEAVE THEM ALONE TO DEAL WITH IT.

WHAT TO THINK, SAY, OR DO INSTEAD
“It can be really hard/frustrating when [_____] happens; how are you? Do you want to talk now or some other time?”
Practice openness and curiosity by committing to learn about the experiences, expectations, and hopes of team members who are different from you in some way. You do not need to have the same experiences as other people to demonstrate empathy with them.

**WHAT YOU THINK, SAY, OR DO**

“I’M NOT [INSERT GROUP MEMBERSHIP], SO I AM GOING TO SKIP THE DISCUSSION ABOUT [___].”

**HOW IT’S NOT BEHAVIORAL EMPATHY**

Ignoring or avoiding conversations about social justice because you do not belong to the group that is seeking equity, rights, or recognition perpetuates the status quo. Refusing to engage sends the message that you don’t care about your colleagues’ experiences.

**WHAT TO THINK, SAY, OR DO INSTEAD**

“I am a little uncomfortable with the discussion, but I know how important it is for me to better understand your experiences, so I will definitely be there. It’s important to me, and I value the opportunity for growth.”

**LISTEN DEEPLY**

When someone shares their emotions or experiences, **pause your internal voice** that seeks to explain why they are acting in a certain way. You’ll likely be surprised by how incorrect you are at guessing what they are thinking and feeling and why.

**CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING**

Once you’ve created space for someone to share, **reflect back on what you’ve heard** to ensure your understanding is accurate. This helps you build your empathy skills and demonstrates care and interest for a colleague’s perspectives and experiences.

**UPSKILL**

Anyone can intentionally cultivate and practice their empathy skills. Remember that empathy is not a burden on time and energy; it actually boosts well-being, happiness, and connection.


