**Exercise: Linking Emotions, Thoughts and Behaviours**

There are a number of primary emotions we all experience, regardless of background or culture. Three common primary emotions are anger, sadness and fear. All emotions – positive or negative – are associated with certain characteristic ways we think of ourselves, ways we perceive others and the world, and with certain behaviours (actions) and physical reactions.

Understanding the link between emotions, thoughts and behaviours can be a useful tool for managers dealing with negative emotions in the workplace. It helps in stressful situations to have the clearest possible perception of a worker’s emotional state, but sometimes this is difficult to ascertain. Sometimes they are too upset to tell you, for example, and sometimes they may not feel comfortable sharing the information. It can work to your advantage to be able to use as many cues as possible to understand the situation. A worker’s thoughts (as expressed through their comments, etc.) and behaviours may provide insight into their emotional reactions.

To begin exploring the link between emotions, thoughts and behaviours, revisit some of your own experiences with primary emotions. We all react in different ways to emotional experiences, but building an understanding of your own reactions can provide clues to other people’s reactions in similar situations.

The intention of the exercise is to make the link between how our thoughts and emotions can lead directly to our physiological reactions and behaviours. Becoming more aware of thoughts and emotions, can help to better manage or respond to the reactions that follow.

While you may never accurately guess another’s thoughts or emotions, you can become aware of their impact and rather than reacting exclusively to the behaviour, become curious about the thoughts and emotions. This can open up the opportunity for a more valuable conversation with the individual.

Be as specific as possible in the tables below. Examples appear in italics.
Think of a time you were angry:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EMOTIONS:</th>
<th>Describe the range of emotions you felt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frustration at Fred’s unwillingness to compromise, and rage at the regional manager’s decision to fire him</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THOUGHTS:</th>
<th>What types of thoughts were in your mind?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both Fred and the regional manager needed to just take a few moments and calm down before talking further</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSIOLOGICAL REACTIONS:</th>
<th>How did your body react?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My stomach was in knots and I was sweating right through my shirt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEHAVIOIRS:</th>
<th>What did you do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I left the room after telling them that I wouldn’t stay and watch them both make damaging decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Think of a time you were sad or hurt:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EMOTIONS: Describe the range of emotions you felt</th>
<th>THOUGHTS: What types of thoughts were in your mind?</th>
<th>PHYSIOLOGICAL REACTIONS: How did your body react?</th>
<th>BEHAVIOURS: What did you do?</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
Think of a time you were fearful:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EMOTIONS: Describe the range of emotions you felt</th>
<th>THOUGHTS: What types of thoughts were in your mind?</th>
<th>PHYSIOLOGICAL REACTIONS: How did your body react?</th>
<th>BEHAVIOURS: What did you do?</th>
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<td></td>
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Exercise: Listening without Interrupting

Negative emotions in the workplace can arise because workers feel that their opinions and ideas are not being heard and appreciated. In contrast, workers who believe that managers value what they say can be much more likely to maintain positive emotions (and exemplary productivity). Important to success in this area is effective listening, which begins with listening without interrupting.

Often, if we wait long enough during an exchange, we will receive the answers to our questions. But all too often, particularly when facing workplace demands, we tend to want to rush to obtain answers, and we spend more time talking than listening. Simply pausing and listening to others can be extremely helpful in terms of gathering information and building a connection with workers.

Actively practice pausing and listening without interruption to what others have to say. Resist the urge to ask a question or share an idea. Be comfortable with pauses. Avoid invalidating another person’s efforts to communicate by assuming you know what they’re going to say before they have finished their sentence. If you catch yourself interrupting, don’t let that derail your task. Just apologize for the interruption and resume listening intently.
Exercise: Recognizing and Replicating Support

It can be helpful for managers who must address negative emotions in the workplace to begin with an understanding of their own negative emotions and reactions. An integral part of this understanding is an awareness of the types of support to which you respond best in stressful situations. Knowing this not only helps you encourage people to relate to you in ways that you prefer, but also helps you replicate the most useful types of support when dealing with others.

Think about two different times you were struggling with a difficult workplace situation, one where you found other managers or workers supportive, and another where you found them unsupportive.

Supportive Workplace Response

What was said to you by others? (be specific):

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

How did you feel? (list as many emotional and physical reactions as you can recall):

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

How did the response help you deal with the stressors you were experiencing?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
When might this same response have been less helpful for you?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

Unsupportive Workplace Response

What was said to you by others? (be specific): ________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

How did you feel? (list as many emotional and physical reactions as you can recall): ________________

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

How did the response add to the stressors you were experiencing? ________________

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

When might this same response have been more helpful for you?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
Consider how you choose your response in any given situation. Also think about whether you tend to use these types of supportive responses and avoid the unsupportive responses when managing workers in stressful situations. To what extent can you replicate with others the approaches that you find effective for your own stressful times, while acknowledging workers’ unique individual needs?
Exercise: Acknowledging Differences

When managing negative emotions in the workplace, a range of considerations are important. One critical aspect relates to the diverse characteristics of the workers involved. Awareness of emotions, and comfort and openness in speaking about emotions, varies by sex, age, personality, cultural background, and ethnicity. The most effective managers attempt to understand their workers’ individual characteristics related to emotions and emotional reactions. These managers then use this information to create personalized strategies for addressing the negative emotions of different workers.

Think of a situation in which you dealt creatively with a distressed employee who demonstrated a particular characteristic or style. Describe the situation and characteristic/style here:
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

How did you approach the situation differently than you might have with another worker who did not share that characteristic/style?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

What cues prompted you to approach the situation differently than you might have otherwise?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

Are you glad you approached the situation the way you did? Why or why not? What would you have done differently, if anything?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

Reflect on the range of differences among your workers, and how you might take different approaches with each of them when dealing with negative emotional reactions.
**Exercise: Asking Open-Ended Questions**

Especially when workers are under stress, asking open-ended rather than closed questions may help to elicit useful information.

Closed questions tend to force a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response. “*Do you have enough time to get this project done?*” is a closed question.

Open-ended questions, in contrast, solicit fuller and more detailed responses. “*How are you feeling about the timelines for this project?*” is an open-ended question. It is more likely to elicit an accurate and thoughtful response from a worker. The nature of open-ended questions, due to their inherent solicitation of a more detailed response, also tends to create more positive feelings in workers, because they are more likely to feel that their input is valued.

Go through your day asking open-ended questions. Be aware of the differences in responses you receive compared to the closed questions you have asked previously. How is the information you obtain different? Can you sense any difference in the tone of your interactions with workers?
Exercise: Awareness of Other People’s Emotions

Accurately understanding the emotion states workers are experiencing can be a tricky thing for a manager to accomplish. When people appear distressed, we tend to jump to non-specific, general labels (e.g., “he is upset”) without really understanding the nuances of their emotional experience. But it is exactly these nuances that can provide vital information about how to handle a situation.

Understanding another person’s emotions involves much more than just listening to their spoken words. It requires being attentive to the non-verbal emotional messages being communicated.

Think of a situation where you had to speak to someone who was distressed. Describe the situation here:

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

What verbal messages (words) did the person convey?

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

What non-verbal messages was the person projecting? Think of the following:

Posture: _____________________________________________________

Tone: _______________________________________________________

Eye contact: ________________________________________________

Energy level: _______________________________________________

Other: __________________________________________________________

Was there a discrepancy between the verbal messages and the non-verbal messages?

____________________________________________________________________________

When you consider all information, what emotion state do you think the person was experiencing?

____________________________________________________________________________
Throughout the course of your day, make an active effort to pay attention to other people’s verbal and non-verbal messages. Take note of any discrepancies between the two. Think about what emotion(s) people are most likely experiencing when you consider both their verbal and non-verbal messages.

If you notice major discrepancies between a worker’s verbal and non-verbal emotional messages, it may be a great opportunity to sit down with them and connect by asking them for feedback about anything you could do to improve their ability to do their job.
Exercise: Building Empathy through Mirroring

Managers can better deal with negative emotions in the workplace when they make efforts to truly understand what leads to individual workers’ emotional reactions. Empathizing with workers – being able to put yourself in their emotional ‘shoes’ – can be an important step toward understanding.

A primary component of empathy is the ability to mirror others nonverbally. We can teach ourselves to become more empathetic by mirroring the body positions, posture, tone, volume, gestures, and facial expressions of others. To understand how mirroring encourages empathy, imagine yourself in your most empathetic moments. Perhaps someone has suffered a loss in the family or some other trauma. It feels natural to stoop a little and use softer gestures and facial expressions when discussing the matter with them. Their demeanor prompts us to mirror them, and as we do, we learn more about how they feel. Forcing yourself to mirror another individual has largely the same effect.

Next time you encounter a worker who seems distressed, find a private spot immediately afterward and mirror them as accurately as you can from memory. How do you feel? How do you think they were feeling? Are your judgments confirmed at some later point?
Exercise: Distinguishing Acknowledgment from Agreement

Because every individual has different needs and views, negative emotions in the workplace can never be avoided completely. Effective listening can help managers better problem-solve and generate solutions that come closer to meeting everyone’s needs. Listen first and acknowledge and validate what you hear – even if you don’t agree with it – before expressing your point of view. When you acknowledge a worker’s perspective, it can send a strong signal that although you may or may not agree, and may or may not take action accordingly, you have heard the viewpoint and are taking it into consideration.

Acknowledging that someone else’s feelings are valid for them, even when you do not feel the same way, can allow your communication partner to feel heard and therefore better able to listen. Some managers may be apprehensive that actually acknowledging a perspective ties their hands by creating a responsibility to respond in a certain way. This is not generally true. Acknowledging another person’s thoughts and feelings still leaves you with the following options:

- Agreeing or disagreeing with the person’s point of view or actions
- Informing them that a request cannot be granted, but that you are willing to explore other ways to meet the same need
- Further exploring and discussing the matter under consideration

Practice acknowledging workers’ ideas and requests. Make sure to do so in a way that cannot be confused for agreement unless you do, in fact, agree. Monitor workers’ responses and compare them to responses when their viewpoints remain unacknowledged.
Exercise: Eliciting Feedback

Workers may not be comfortable providing feedback unless requested for it. Even then, many may hesitate, suspecting that the call for feedback may not be wholly genuine, and that they may anger managers by speaking out. One approach to avoiding negative emotions in the workplace is to ensure that workers feel that their feedback is valued and appreciated. Offering and accepting feedback can help create strong relationships between managers and workers. This makes it important for managers to actively elicit feedback whenever opportunities present themselves. By doing so, you may not only receive more helpful feedback, but also create the understanding that the request for feedback is genuine. You may also obtain information useful in understanding the impact of the situations and conversations in which you are involved.

**Actively elicit feedback throughout the day. Try asking a worker after a conversation:**

“How did this conversation feel for you?”

“How do you feel like I am understanding you properly?”

“Is there anything I am missing or didn’t ask about that would be important for me to know?”

**Notice how asking these questions impacts not only the workers, but also how you feel about conversations and other interactions.**
Exercise: Eliciting Opinions

When trying to manage distressed workers, and negative workplace emotions in general, it can be challenging to know exactly what to say, suggest, or do to “fix” a situation. An important thing to keep in mind is that most of us are experts when it comes to our own lives. It sounds obvious, but each of us has lived our whole life with our self, we have seen ourselves through good times and bad times, and we often have a good sense of what makes us feel better and what makes us feel worse. When someone is distressed, it can be useful for a manager to ask them “What could I do that would be helpful to you?”

Make a point of touching base with each person who works under your supervision. Ask them if there is anything you could do that could be helpful to them or improve the way they are able to do their job. Be aware of the number of times you receive a suggestion that may be small and simple, but that you may not have thought of on your own.

Doing this exercise routinely with each worker can help prepare you to act when one of them may be emotionally distressed. Rather than trying to gather all this information during a stressful time, you will have built a base of knowledge in advance, and it should be much easier to understand and communicate with a worker in an emotionally charged situation.
Exercise: Evaluating Judgments

The way we feel about or react to individuals in the workplace is impacted by our explanations of their behaviour. When it comes to ourselves, we are much more likely to find external explanations for negative behaviour and internal explanations for positive behaviour.

Consider the following examples:

- If I trip while walking across the office, I say “the carpet was wrinkled”. If I win an award, I assume it’s because I worked hard.

- If I raise my voice in a meeting, I believe it’s because I have had to tolerate too much ineptitude to remain calm.

But, when explaining others’ behaviour, we tend to do the opposite….

- If I see someone else trip on the office floor, I say “they are clumsy”. If someone else wins an award, I assume it’s because they were lucky.

- If someone else raises their voice in a meeting, I believe it’s because they can’t handle pressure.

Spend the day being aware of your automatic assumptions related to other people’s behaviour. Stop and evaluate your judgments, working toward finding external causes for any negative behaviour they may exhibit.
**Exercise: Listening to Understand**

We engage in *listening to understand* when we sincerely try to understand not just what people say, but also what they really mean. When workers are distressed or dealing with mental health issues, it is not unusual for them to say things that do not really reflect what they truly mean. Giving someone the safety and the space to articulate and then clarify or correct what they say can give you a much better chance of understanding their perspective. Asking open-ended questions to solicit additional information and refraining from interrupting can improve the interaction further.

Sometimes the content of what we hear in a workplace interaction will elicit an emotional response in us. As we listen to others, we may be distracted by our own internal chatter that can include judgments, opinions, and reactions to what is being said. When we *listen to understand*, we focus on the individual and their agenda, not our own. We listen for underlying issues and needs to better prepare ourselves to begin a discussion about solutions.

**Practice listening to understand in every opportunity that presents itself this week.** Do you find that you obtain more useful information and ideas this way? Do you learn anything that you missed in a previous conversation in which you didn't fully use your listening skills? How do you feel about the quality of your interactions with workers? Do you sense anything about their opinions of your exchange?
Exercise: Matching Intent and Behaviour

Communication and interaction in the workplace is complex and demanding, and it requires considerable energy to maintain a standard that reflects our goals. It can happen that in our minds we have the best intentions, but our behaviour is not quite able to keep up. Managers often find they disagree with the way they are described by workers. This may be because there is a discrepancy between their internal intent and external behaviour. In other words, their thoughts and actions don’t match.

When you’re described in ways with which you disagree, make a plan for changing your external behaviour to better reflect your true intent. For each of the areas you disagree with, complete the following sentence:

When I come across as ____________________, I am actually intending to communicate ____________________________________________________________________________________________________.

I will be mindful of my external behaviour by specifically doing the following:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________.
Exercise: Practicing Non-Judgmental Interpretations

When we interact with a distressed employee, it is natural to try to understand what is motivating their negative emotions and reactions. We can often be quite accurate when ascertaining the causes of and contributors to other people’s positive emotion states. One of the traps we may fall into, however, when dealing with negative emotions in the workplace, is making simplistic and judgmental interpretations, such as:

“Tim’s always upset with coworkers because he’s a jerk.”

“Nicole is always on the verge of tears because she’s such a softie.”

“Danielle is always anxious when there are tight deadlines because she’s not cut out for her position.”

Judgmental interpretations are often wrong, and almost always completely unhelpful. Taking the time to develop a non-judgmental understanding of workers, their behaviours, and their reactions to situations is critical to managing them effectively.

Spend a day noticing your thoughts, assumptions and judgments about others. Be aware of how many of these thoughts are objective or factual (e.g., “Tim is speaking to his coworker in a loud voice”) versus how many are based on subjective or unfounded assumptions or judgments (e.g., “Tim is a jerk”). What percentage of your thoughts were objective/factual versus judgmental? Actively work on catching your judgmental thoughts and translating them into objective, factual descriptions. This can be important in helping you develop constructive and non-judgmental interpretations of workplace situations and behaviours. This process takes time and practice, but will eventually start to feel natural.
Exercise: Understanding Personal Barriers

Dealing with negative emotions in the workplace can be one of a manager’s greatest challenges. Not only are interactions with distressed workers complex and delicate, managers may face personal barriers and emotional triggers that make it especially difficult for them to engage in emotionally charged situations. Understanding these barriers can be an important first step toward being comfortable and effective when dealing with negative emotions in the workplace.

Think of personal barriers that commonly arise for you when called upon to address workers’ negative emotions. What parts of dealing with different emotion states are difficult for you? What can you do to overcome these barriers (it may help to think of times you were successful)? The tables below can help you begin to organize your thoughts on personal barriers related to dealing with the main emotion categories that arise in the workplace: anger, fear and sadness. An example appears in italics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ANGER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dealing with Other People’s Anger is Hard for Me because….</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of Situations in Which I Dealt Effectively with Someone Else’s Anger….</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Things I Can Do to Overcome My Personal Barriers….</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m scared I’m going to say something wrong and the situation could turn violent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dealing with Other People’s Fear is Hard for Me because….</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of Situations in Which I Dealt Effectively with Someone Else’s Fear….</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Things I Can Do to Overcome My Personal Barriers….</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dealing with Other People’s Sadness is Hard for Me because….

Examples of Situations in Which I Dealt Effectively with Someone Else’s Sadness….

Specific Things I Can Do to Overcome My Personal Barriers….
Exercise: Using Different Means to the Same End

In the workplace setting, we often have very clear ‘ends’ (goals or outcomes) that we are working toward (e.g., effective completion or delivery of a range of tasks and responsibilities). When a worker we are managing is distressed, our own stress level may increase, because we feel that the ends toward which we are working are being threatened. This can lead us to approach emotionally charged situations in what we believe is generically the most effective or appropriate manner. This may mean, however, that we have given little thought to whether the approach is the most effective or appropriate approach for that individual. It may be that the same situation can be approached in multiple ways, all working toward the same desired end. The best strategy is almost always to approach situations differently based on the specific workers involved.

Think about the range of different ways in which you could approach an employee in the following situations:

You overhear a worker speaking disrespectfully to a customer on the telephone.
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

You see a worker – who should be working on an urgent deadline – repeatedly checking their Facebook account throughout the day.
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

You observe a worker who is leaving the staff lunch room teary-eyed.
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

Reflect on the factors you take into consideration when deciding how to approach specific workers.
Exercise: Using Self-Talk to Overcome Barriers

We often stumble in our attempts to deal with negative emotions in the workplace due to fears that we will do or say the wrong thing. Often, managers avoid approaching a worker who is distressed because they feel that they may make the situation worse or say something inappropriate. Instead of taking action, they hope the situation will resolve itself (although this is rarely the case). Often, what we tell ourselves about our skills and abilities, in other words our ‘self-talk’, is our biggest hurdle in terms of posing barriers to approaching a distressed worker.

Think about an emotionally charged situation that was particularly difficult for you. Identify the thoughts (worries, fears, insecurities) that came to your mind before and during the situation. What was your worst imagined scenario about how things would turn out? How did the situation actually turn out?

Situation: _____________________________________________________________

Thoughts that arose: _______________________________________________________

Worst imagined scenario: ___________________________________________________

How the situation actually turned out: _______________________________________

When next approaching a distressed worker, use self-talk to your advantage. Remind yourself that our initial thoughts are often inaccurate and somewhat catastrophic, and that the worst imagined scenario rarely occurs. Rather than focusing solely on worst-case scenarios, use positive self-talk to remind yourself of your many successes in challenging situations.
Building Reflective Listening Skills

Effective communication with workers is important for managers – and can be particularly important when workers are emotionally distressed. Reflective (or active) listening can be an effective communication method that involves the following two elements:

1. **Listening to and understanding** what workers are saying, thinking and feeling.
2. **Reflecting and paraphrasing** the feelings, thoughts and opinions we hear back to the other person in our own words, to make sure we have understood their message correctly.

In order to more accurately understand workers’ messages, it helps for managers to not only pay attention to what a worker is saying (**verbal communication**), but also to read non-verbal signals (**non-verbal communication**). Any message usually has two components: the content of the message (words) and the underlying feelings, thoughts and opinions. Workers’ non-verbal signals (e.g., tone of voice, eye contact, facial expression, body language) can give important clues about their feelings and opinions.

Reflective listening can be essential for effective communication and strong workplace relationships:

- It can help build rapport and respect.
- It can promote understanding between people.
- It can demonstrate recognition and acknowledgment, which may prompt others to keep talking and share their experiences, problems and feelings more openly.
- It can give reassurance that someone is willing to help and to view things from another perspective.
- It can help avoid conflicts and misunderstandings.
- It can help reduce defensiveness, resentments and false assumptions that occur through misunderstanding.

Informing others that we have understood what they have said (or otherwise indicated) can be useful in any day-to-day event at work (e.g., meetings, customer contacts, performance reviews). But reflecting back to workers can be particularly valuable for dealing with conflicts and helping individuals understand one another.

Here are some tips that can help you better understand workers.
Practice Attentive Listening

- **Give your full attention to your communication partner.** Active listening takes concentration. In order to pay attention to a worker carefully, you must minimize distractions. If your mind drifts to something else, or you start daydreaming, or you become distracted by your environment, you not only demonstrate disinterest, but probably also miss important non-verbal signals the other person is sending.

- **Show that you’re listening and understanding.** By letting a worker know you are listening and understanding, you may encourage them to keep talking and also give them an opportunity to clarify their thoughts and feelings if you seem to be off track. Make eye contact, smile, nod your head, and make comments such as yes, ok, aha, ah, um, oh, go on.

Seek Total Understanding

- **Note all the clues.** Be mindful of non-verbal communication: non-verbal clues can often give a more accurate picture of what a worker is experiencing than do their words.

- **Listen to the total meanings.** Listen not only to the literal content of the message but also to the feelings, thoughts and opinions underlying this content. For example, if a worker appears angry after a performance review, but says “I understand, and I’ll work harder on those things”, a perceptive manager will note that they may disagree but for some reason do not want to speak up.

- **Empathize with the other person’s point of view.** Try to view things from the worker’s perspective. Consider their background, history and previous behaviour at work. Remind yourself that the worker has different life experiences and may not see things the way you do. What he or she means by a statement might be very different from what you would mean if you used the same words.

Reflect Back

- **Paraphrase what the other person has said.** Reflect what you heard back to the other person. Don’t parrot back the same words, but rather use your own words to rephrase what they said. This way you demonstrate your understanding.
  - Use phrases such as “It seems that…”; “So you are saying…”; “It looks as though…”; “It sounds like…”; “What I’m hearing is…”; “In other words…”; “I get the impression that…”; “You mean…”; “You feel that…”; “I’m sensing…”; “I wonder if…”.
  - **Example:** A worker approaches his manager wondering why another worker is leading the new project although she is less experienced and hasn’t been with the company as long. The manager could reflect back: “It seems as though you feel the project leader decision is unfair.”
- **Reflect the other person’s feelings and meanings.** Sometimes the literal content of a message is less important than the underlying feelings, thoughts and opinions. When a worker talks to you while experiencing an intense emotional state (e.g., when they’re upset, angry, frustrated, anxious), try to respond to their emotional message and mirror their feelings and meanings accurately.

  - Use phrases such as “It seems that he really upset you”; “I get the impression that you’re pretty frustrated about that”; “I’m sensing that you’re quite discouraged”; “I feel that you’re unhappy with your situation”.
  - **Example:** If a worker says “I’m finally finished with that stupid project!”, you could reflect back: “It sounds like you had a hard time with it” or “I get the impression that you’re frustrated and don’t feel like doing anything like that again.”

- **Summarize the other person’s message.** A good way to capture the essence of what a worker has expressed is to summarize the main messages from time to time, or at the close of your conversation. This can be particularly important if you reached an agreement or decision regarding next steps, to help ensure that both parties have the same understanding of the agreement.

- **Ask clarifying questions.** If you don’t completely understand the worker’s message, ask clarifying questions. For example:

  - “What I thought you just said is… Is that what you meant?”
  - “Sorry, I didn’t follow that. What are you saying?”
  - “What do you mean when you say…?”
  - “Could you give me an example?”
  - “Can you tell me more about…?”
  - “How was that for you? What are you feeling about that?”
  - “It sounds like you’re pretty upset. Did something happen?”
  - “So how will you deal with that?”
  - “What do you think should be done about this situation?”

You may also want to see the handout on **Verbal vs. Non-Verbal Communication.**
Addressing a Worker’s Anger

Managers are required to deal with workers who exhibit anger in the workplace, especially given the negative impact this can have on other workers, productivity, and overall workplace morale. Some managers choose to ignore infrequent or low-intensity demonstrations of anger. In relatively trivial cases, this may be the best approach, because occasional anger is natural, may not be evidence of a problem, and may have no lasting effect on the workplace. High-intensity or frequent angry outbursts represent a different issue. Here are a few tips to consider, where appropriate, on how to address workers who regularly or intensely express anger:

1. **Hold the conversation at a time of relative calm:** This is not a response to use in the midst of escalated emotion or anger. (For additional information [www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com](http://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com) → Leadership/Management → Prevention & Crisis Response)

2. **Express your intention to help:** Let them know that you want to help and work with them to help ensure a respectful and safe work environment for all.

3. **Discuss observed changes:** Start by letting them know that you've observed changes in their behaviour. Identify the time period in which you've made these observations. Be specific and objective in describing the behaviour you have seen, and avoid making assumptions or laying blame (as this will likely just lead to defensiveness).

4. **Point out the impact of their behaviour:** Describe the negative impact their behaviour is having on others.

5. **Ask about contributing factors:** Ask if any workplace factors may be contributing to their anger.

6. **Take a problem-solving approach:** Work to identify and problem-solve any contributing factors. Try to agree upon immediate strategies for minimizing the impact of anger on others.

7. **Establish boundaries:** Be direct in describing acceptable vs. unacceptable workplace behaviours. This can be particularly important if the worker is engaging in disrespectful, uncivil, bullying, harassing or otherwise abusive behaviours (toward managers, workers or clients/customers). Remain unapologetic in your expression of behaviours that must change.

8. **Set a time for follow-up:** Establish a time period in which you will expect to see changes. Agree on a plan and ensure you schedule a follow-up time to check in with the worker.
Different Approaches for Different Emotions

One of the challenges managers face is to know how to stay flexible and adaptive when dealing with distressed workers. The way you respond to someone who is distressed can make a significant difference in terms of whether they feel supported (and in some cases less distressed) after your interaction, or whether they feel unsupported (and possibly more distressed).

It can be important to address a worker’s distress early on, to use active/reflective listening, and to ask empathetic questions. It is always helpful to remain “present” and calm, and to control your own emotional reactions. It is also important to be mindful of your non-verbal behaviour and the messages it may be sending (see the information handout Verbal vs. Non-Verbal Communication).

Perhaps most critically, it is important to tailor your approach to each individual worker and situation, keeping in mind that different approaches are more or less effective for different emotion states. The way you approach someone who is angry should differ from your approach with someone who is sad.

The table below shows different approaches that can be taken for different emotion states, and highlights those that may be more or less effective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Less Effective Approach</th>
<th>More Effective Approach</th>
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</table>
| Worker appears sad or hurt. | You try to “boost the energy” of the worker by being extra positive or happy. Your rate of speech speeds up, you have a “chipper” tone, you smile, hoping that the worker will feel better after your interaction.  
(This may make the worker feel invalidated and misunderstood. They may “shut down” and not want to communicate further.) | Use a soft tone, staying mindful of slowing down your rate of speech. Lean forward and communicate that you are listening by nodding your head or saying “um”, “hmmm”, etc. Pause to let the worker speak. Do not make intense eye contact, instead allowing the worker to have “space” to feel sad or hurt. Focus on listening and taking a supportive (not problem-solving) approach.  
(With sadness and hurt, “mirroring” the non-verbal tone of the conversation can help you feel more empathetic, and can increase the likelihood of the worker feeling understood.) |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Less Effective Approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worker appears fearful or anxious.</td>
<td>You feed off the fear/anxiety the worker is communicating. You talk more rapidly and become nervous yourself. You approach the interaction with a sense of urgency, wanting to convey that you understand the source of the worker’s fear or anxiety. (There is a “contagion” effect with certain emotion states, particularly fear/anxiety. This can have the unintended effect of increasing the worker’s anxiety even further. They may feel as though the conversation is being “rushed”).</td>
<td>Be mindful of using a calm but assertive and confident tone (speaking not overly softly or slowly, as this may come across as patronizing). Maintain eye contact. Focus on redirecting the worker toward taking constructive actions, using a problem-solving approach. (With fear or anxiety, maintaining an assertive and confident stance can help the worker feel you are “present” with them, and can provide reassurance that can have a calming effect.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker appears angry.</td>
<td>You want to communicate that the anger is inappropriate, so you take an assertive stance that borders on aggressive; you maintain strong eye contact and speak in a loud, direct and strong tone of voice. You lean in toward the worker, wanting to ensure that you appear forceful. (Responding in an aggressive manner can have the unintended impact of further “fueling” and escalating someone’s anger.)</td>
<td>Maintain an assertive stance and tone, but remain mindful of not making intense eye contact. Lean away from (not toward) the worker. Keep your voice calm and steady, and stay aware of not increasing your volume or rate of speech. Try to understand the source of the worker’s anger and any work-specific needs that they may feel are not being met. Do not blame or take a combative approach. (Maintaining a gently assertive stance that contrasts with the worker’s anger can communicate that the anger is inappropriate and establishes your boundaries, and should help prevent escalating the situation.)</td>
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Emotions and their Functions

It can be natural to question whether emotional reactions serve useful functions in the workplace: after all, when we’re at work we have a job to do, and experiencing unpleasant or intense emotions can feel like an unnecessary distraction. Managers in particular may wonder whether it is correct to accept emotional reactions in the workplace. It is important to realize, however, that emotions can serve a valuable role and can be an important source of information to guide our behaviour. Emotions (positive and negative) can serve a useful function, even if this function is not always immediately evident. Thinking about why a worker is demonstrating a particular emotional reaction can help you understand how to best manage and support the worker.

All emotions serve one (or more) of the following core functions:

- **Emotions motivate action**: Emotions can motivate us to respond to situations. Our emotions may inform us about our circumstances and the environment we are in, which helps us act appropriately. For example, if we sense discomfort or fear, we may respond by addressing, avoiding, or leaving the situation. If we feel anxious about a new work task, we may respond by practicing in advance to enhance our preparedness.

- **Emotions communicate valuable information to others**: Emotions can communicate important messages to those around us. They may tell others how we are feeling and what we need in a given situation. If we look sad, for example, we are communicating to others that we need support. If we are angry, we are signaling to others that they have crossed our boundaries.

- **Emotions are self-validating**: Emotions can communicate to ourselves that something important is happening that may impact some important part of our life. Our emotions may let us know what we like/don’t like, or when something is missing or needed. Feeling rejected, for example, highlights that we miss the acceptance of others. If we feel lonely, it’s a sign that our need for social contact may be unmet.

Identifying the function served by a particular emotion can help us know what action to take and what types of support we and/or workers may need. Here are some examples of the specific functions (useful or problematic) that different emotions may have in the workplace:

**Fear**

*Example*: A new worker is afraid to speak up and be assertive because he fears saying the wrong thing, and worries about his inexperience relative to other workers.

- **Motivate action**: Fear motivates avoidance of stressors. The new worker may avoid the situations creating stress by not showing up to important team meetings or calling in sick instead.
- **Communicate to others:** Fear communicates to others that we need support.
  The new worker’s anxious and avoidant behaviour indicates to managers that he might need help coping with his new job situation. As a result, they might provide more orientation and training, as well as more confidence-building positive feedback.

- **Self-validating:** Fear self-validates that something is worrisome.
  The anxious feeling tells the new worker that he doesn’t feel skilled or confident enough to do his new job. He might conclude that he needs more training to overcome his anxiety, and so decide to sign up for an evening course.

**Anger**

*Example:* A worker is angry at a colleague for taking more breaks than allowed, leaving others to pick up the slack.

- **Motivate action:** Anger motivates self-protection.
  The worker needs to protect herself from becoming overloaded with work. Her angry feeling prompts her to address an unfair situation so that she doesn’t end up being stressed and unhappy at work.

- **Communicate to others:** Anger communicates to others that we are feeling disrespected, it sets boundaries with others, and it alerts them when they may overstep those boundaries.
  The worker’s angry response communicates to her colleague that he may have done something upsetting. As a result, he might decide to approach his co-worker to identify her concerns.

- **Self-validating:** Anger self-validates that we are being disrespected or attacked, or that our boundaries are being crossed.
  The angry feeling alerts the worker that she feels she is being treated unfairly and disrespectfully. She might conclude that she needs to stand up for herself and try to talk things out.

**Sadness**

*Example:* A worker is being teased excessively by his workplace colleagues. He feels sad that he is rejected at work.

- **Motivate action:** Sadness motivates protection behaviours such as withdrawal from excessive stressors.
  The worker needs to protect himself from having his self-esteem damaged. His sad feelings send him a message to do something about this situation.
Communicate to others: Sadness communicates to others that we need support. The worker’s non-verbal presentation of sadness concerns his manager and indicates to her that the worker might need support. As a result, the manager might inquire what’s behind the sadness and whether there’s anything that she can do to help.

Self-validating: Sadness self-validates that something upsetting is happening, or that a loss may occur. The sad feeling tells the worker that he is missing acceptance from his work colleagues. He might conclude that he needs to change jobs, or he may ask his supervisor to address the issue with the other workers.

Guilt

Example: A manager feels guilty because a newly-hired worker has already needed to put in a large amount of overtime to replace two workers absent due to illness.

Motivate action: Guilt motivates us to make amends or apologize (for the purpose of our relief). The manager feels responsible for addressing the worker’s circumstances. Her guilt tells her to do something to improve the situation.

Communicate to others: Guilt communicates to others that they matter to us. The manager’s guilty feelings and apologies indicate to the worker that the manager is aware of her obligations and cares about his situation. As a result, the worker might feel less resentment and accept reparation graciously.

Self-validating: Guilt self-validates that you have violated internal standards (that you have done something you feel bad about or that you missed out on something you should have done). The guilt tells the manager that she should have intervened earlier to prevent the worker from becoming overloaded with work. She might conclude that she should apologize and hire a temporary substitute worker to ease the load.

Shame

Example: A worker feels ashamed because he begins to stutter almost every time he presents at team meetings.

Motivate action: Shame motivates self-protection, avoidance of actions that might be destructive of relationships. The worker needs to protect himself from further public embarrassment. He might avoid the situation by not speaking up at meetings. Or, he may be motivated to work on reducing his level of stress and anxiety during meetings to decrease the likelihood that he stutters.
- **Communicate to others**: Shame communicates to others that we need support. The worker’s demonstration of shame and or avoidant behaviour indicates to his manager that the worker might need help overcoming his public speaking problems. As a result, the manager might change certain aspects of the meeting or offer supports to the worker to improve his comfort when speaking in public.

- **Self-validating**: Shame self-validates that our social boundaries have been violated or that our value within a group has been threatened. The feeling of shame tells the worker that he's frustrated by not feeling as skilled as other workers at public speaking. This validates the importance of doing well in his position.
Responding to Emotionally Distressed Workers

When we see a worker who is distressed (e.g., due to personal problems, mental health difficulties, co-worker conflicts, performance issues), we may experience a variety of emotions ourselves: fear, anger, frustration, guilt, pity or helplessness. It is very natural to have these emotional reactions, but they can interfere with our ability to effectively respond to a distressed worker. Our own emotions can have a powerful impact on our attention, perception, thoughts and behaviour. Emotions can be the motivating force behind our actions, and can determine whether we respond effectively (by providing support or assistance) or less effectively (by avoiding a situation).

Identifying and responding to distressed workers can be a core component of a manager’s role. Since struggling workers can be less productive and more often absent, their impact on the success of the entire team can be substantial.

As a manager, it’s not only important to know the warning signs of distress and possess the knowledge and skills required to respond to it appropriately, but also to be aware of the impact our own situation (e.g., emotional state) can have on our ability to help. It is important to be “present” and calm when responding to a distressed worker.

The emotional reactions we experience can pose barriers to responding effectively to distressed workers.

- **Fear**: Responding to a distressed worker can be daunting. Anxiety is a normal, natural response to an unknown situation. Our own discomfort or fear may cause us to avoid or ignore the situation.
  
  o **Alternative Approach**: Remind yourself that a worker's emotional distress is rarely about you. Remain focused on workers’ needs. Avoiding a situation may reduce your fear in the short-term, but addressing the situation promptly and directly can be the better approach.

- **Frustration, anger**: A distressed worker might make us feel angry or frustrated, for example when the worker’s emotional state interferes with teamwork or affects customer satisfaction. The anger emotion may cultivate aggression and revenge. If we are frustrated or angry, we may become verbally abusive (e.g., blaming or yelling at the worker) or act intensely agitated.
  
  o **Alternative Approach**: Try to understand where the worker may be coming from and focus on depersonalizing your reaction. Consider having a conversation with the worker when you yourself are in a relatively calm or neutral state. Set parameters for respectful communication – both yours and the worker’s.
- **Guilt** (blaming ourselves): Sometimes we find ourselves feeling responsible for a worker’s situation (e.g., if a worker is overloaded with work). We may feel guilty and might have the urge to make amends or apologize (for the purpose of our relief). We may feel pressured to solve the worker’s problems. For some, guilt will delay taking appropriate action.

  - **Alternative Approach:** Ask yourself if your guilt is valid. If it is, make amends (apologize, take action to resolve the situation). If the guilt is not valid, then think about what other function the guilt may be serving for you.

- **Pity:** The emotion of pity can evoke ‘rescuing’ behaviour. If we are feeling sorry for someone, we may feel the need to ‘fix’ their situation. This can reinforce feelings of powerlessness or helplessness in the individual. Although feeling sorry for someone may be reasonable sympathy for their pain, a better approach may be to help empower workers to take control of their own circumstances.

  - **Alternative Approach:** Ask yourself whether it is your role and responsibility to help the worker, and whether potential change is within your control. This could be true if the issue is work-related. If yes, then take action. If no, where appropriate support the worker to find other solutions.

- **Helplessness:** Confrontation with a worker who is experiencing personal problems (e.g., alcohol use) might be more than we can handle. If we perceive a situation as beyond our control, we feel helpless: we don’t know what would be best to do. The feeling of helplessness can make us indecisive and unable to find an effective coping mechanism.

  - **Alternative Approach:** Seek other supporters at work (other managers, human resources personnel, union stewards) who can provide you with an objective perspective on what action may be helpful.

Managers’ personal emotional reactions can create powerful obstacles to dealing effectively with distressed workers. Other, interrelated factors may complicate the situation even further. Common barriers to responding appropriately to negative emotions in the workplace include the following:

- **Inability to read the signs of distress:** The distressed worker must be identified before we can respond to him or her. If we can’t recognize the signs of distress (e.g., absenteeism, poor job performance, erratic or unusual behaviour), or if we misinterpret the signs, we can miss our chance to react early. We sometimes tend to ignore the first signs of distress, maybe because we perceive them as trivial, or because they are difficult to differentiate from normal behaviour. **Responding to the first signs of distress can be beneficial from a preventative perspective.**
- **Lack of resources:** If we lack the skills to respond to a distressed worker appropriately (e.g., we don’t know what to say or do, we don’t know where to get help), we might avoid or deny the situation. *Taking steps to obtain additional skills training, and seeking assistance from others in your workplace (e.g., your boss, human resources, etc.) can be helpful.*

- **Our own emotional state/stress levels:** If we are not feeling well physically or emotionally, we tend to focus on our own issues and devote our energy to getting through our tasks and responsibilities. At times like this we may not notice a worker’s distress. Our negative emotional state can also make it more difficult to assess someone else’s situation objectively. We may pay more attention to negative signs (ones that match our mood), which may lead to misinterpretation of the worker’s behaviour. *Whenever possible, have conversations with distressed workers when you are in a relatively calm/neutral state. Working to manage your overall levels of personal and work-related stress and using strategies that help you self-regulate in the moment (e.g., deep breathing) can help.*

- **Our own work demands:** When we are overloaded with work ourselves, we might simply be too busy to notice a worker’s distress (e.g., we don’t leave our office anymore, or are often away on business trips). Or, we may recognize the signs but simply don’t have time to deal with the situation, and choose instead to prioritize our own workload and concerns. *If your role includes supervising, managing, supporting or leading others, be mindful of paying attention to workers on a regular basis. Knowing your team and connecting regularly with workers is important.*
Empathic Questions

Empathy – the ability to truly understand another’s perspective – is an important part of being an effective and respected manager. Empathy is conveyed in our non-verbal behaviour, the questions we ask workers, and the statements we make. Asking respectful, open-ended questions can often help obtain information about a worker’s emotional reactions, providing a unique understanding of their experience when emotionally distressed. Individuals are much more likely to feel comfortable and supported in the workplace when they feel they are understood.

The table below contains examples of some workplace situations, and empathic responses that can be effective in those circumstances. Keep in mind that if a worker is emotionally distressed, it is important to respect their privacy by speaking with them discretely. And avoid making assumptions about what might be helpful: focus instead on asking the worker what you can do to help.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worker’s Emotional State/ Situation</th>
<th>Empathic Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A worker at his desk appears sad and withdrawn, although the reason is unclear.</td>
<td>“You don’t seem yourself today. Would you like to chat, or do you think a break would be helpful?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>A worker seems angry and upset during a meeting after you’ve given her some direction on how to approach a project.</td>
<td>In a calm, concerned tone say, “You seem upset…would you like to chat about what I said in the meeting?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>A worker seems frustrated and dissatisfied with the expectations you have expressed. He says, “Wow, I can’t do that. That’s ridiculous.” He shakes his head and clams up.</td>
<td>“You seem frustrated with me…can you let me know why you think that’s ridiculous?” (i.e., use the words the worker uses)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A worker appears upset and tearful after being criticized by you.</td>
<td>“I can see that this feedback is hitting you hard. What can I do to help you build strengths in the areas I mentioned?”</td>
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<td>A worker in customer service was verbally abused by a customer. She is now working quietly without talking about the incident.</td>
<td>“I see that you are working away there. I heard what happened and I wanted to check in to see how you’re doing.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>A worker is sad and tearful after a family member was in a serious car accident.</td>
<td>“I’m sorry to hear about the accident, it sounds awful. Please let me know if there is anything I can do.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>A worker seems upset and anxious after her daughter was diagnosed with a serious illness.</td>
<td>“I can only imagine how hard it must be to have to put on a brave face while at work. What can we do here at work that could help you?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker's Emotional State/ Situation</td>
<td>Empathic Response</td>
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<tr>
<td>A worker is going through a divorce and seems to be having a hard time coping.</td>
<td>“I know how hard it is to stay productive at work while dealing with personal issues…Are there things that can be done here at work that would help you through this time?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>A worker needs to go on sick leave for an emergency surgery. He seems to be in despair, and is tearful when talking to you.</td>
<td>“I’m sorry about the health challenges you are having. I hope you have a full and speedy recovery so we can welcome you back sooner. What can we do in the meantime to help you along?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A worker seems overwhelmed by work as she tries to meet a big deadline. She has been working overtime every day.</td>
<td>“We would hate to lose a hardworking staff member to burn-out. How are you taking care of yourself these days, and is there anything I can do to help?”</td>
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</table>

As you can see, you can be empathic in any type of distress situation – even when the distress is related to you. It is important to keep your own emotions in check and to focus on what the worker might be feeling. When you are being empathic, it is about the worker, not you. Focus on identifying the worker’s feelings, and imagine what it is like to be in their shoes. Then, communicate your sincere concern. Having a few empathic responses in mind (like the ones above) may help prevent you from being caught off guard and lost for words. This is especially important for emotionally charged situations, when you yourself might become affected emotionally.
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.

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<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Sympathy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brief Definition</td>
<td>Empathy is about feelings: we co-experience the emotions of a person with whom we connect.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>“I can imagine you must be feeling so many things – sadness, frustration, anger – since you lost your mother.”</td>
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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:
  - “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:
  - “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:
  - “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.
  - “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.
Verbal vs. Non-Verbal Communication

We communicate with much more than words: when we interact with someone, our body has a language of its own. The way we sit, the gestures we make, the way we talk, how much eye contact we make – all of these are non-verbal ways of communicating that impact the messages our words are sending.

Managers who are adept at dealing with negative emotions in the workplace are mindful of how and what they communicate verbally and non-verbally. They are also receptive to the verbal and non-verbal messages of others. Perceptive managers can go beyond the words to discover the fuller meaning of a statement by observing non-verbal communication.

Our verbal messaging is communicated via the words that we use. The verbal message is of course an important part of our communication, but the way we communicate nonverbally is equally, and sometimes more, important.

Nonverbal communication includes the following:
- Tone of voice
- Rate and volume of speech
- How we articulate our words
- Rhythm, intonation and stress placed on words
- Facial expression
- The amount of eye contact we make
- Gestures/touch
- Body language and posturing

Research shows that when we communicate feelings and attitudes, only a small percentage of our overall message comes from the words we use.
- 55% of our message comes from body language (especially from movements of the small muscles around the eye which can convey shock, disbelief, doubt or disgust)
- 38% of our message comes from tone of voice
- Only 7% of our message is conveyed by the words we use (Mehrabian, 2007)

It’s not what we say, but how we say it that often matters most, especially when we communicate feelings and attitudes. Tone of voice alone can convey anger, frustration, disappointment, sarcasm, confidence, affection or indifference.

Often our verbal and non-verbal messages are consistent, but they can sometimes be inconsistent. If someone’s words conflict with their tone of voice and/or non-verbal behaviours, we often mistrust the words and tend to believe the non-verbal clues instead. It’s not very convincing, for example, when someone tells you they’re not angry at you, but they avoid eye contact, have an angry expression on their face, can barely force out the words, and slam their fist on the table while saying it.
Barriers to Sending Consistent Messages

We sometimes send confusing or negative non-verbal signals without knowing it. Many things can compromise our ability to communicate effectively:

- **Our stress level:** When we are experiencing personal or work-related stressors, we may be more likely to misread other people’s messages and to send inconsistent or negative non-verbal signals. This may make it more likely for us to display inappropriate behaviours (e.g., yelling, blaming or impatience).

- **Our well-being (psychological and/or physical):** If we are not feeling well physically or emotionally, we can be more likely to focus on the negative aspects of a conversation and we may be more likely to send negative or uncaring non-verbal signals.

- **Distraction:** If we are distracted by thoughts or our environment (e.g., looking at emails on our computer screen while speaking to a worker) our non-verbal signals almost certainly convey disinterest. We may give people the impression that we don’t care or are not listening, even when this may not be true.

Effective Non-Verbal Communication

To be able to communicate effectively (and accurately), we must be aware of our own emotions and also understand the non-verbal signals we’re sending to others. Here are some tips that can help you communicate more effectively:

- If you’re feeling stressed or unwell, defer having important conversations. Reducing your own stress levels can help you interact more positively and effectively with others.

- Be aware if your mind is jumping to conclusions or if your face may be giving away your thoughts. To keep yourself from being distracted by or reacting to your own thoughts, try keeping your mind focused on being open and curious about what is being said, and may be said next by the person in front of you. This can prevent some of the eye movements that give away your doubt or discomfort with what is being said.

- **Be attentive to inconsistencies.** Your non-nonverbal signals should reinforce what you’re saying. Make sure your verbal and non-verbal messages match.

- **Give full attention to your communication partner.** Show people you speak to that you are ‘present’ and eager to understand them. Convey attentiveness by:
  - Leaning slightly toward the other person
  - Facing the other person squarely
  - Keeping eye contact
  - Maintaining an open and relaxed posture (with arms uncrossed)
Give signals that express understanding. Indicate that you understand, acknowledge and care with the following non-verbal signals:

- Appropriate head nodding and facial gestures
- Sounds such as “ah”, “hm”, “oh,” expressed with matching eye and facial gestures

The ability to use non-verbal signals appropriately can create trust and transparency, and therefore can have a powerful influence on the quality of our relationships at work.

References

Dealing with Unreasonable Requests

One of the many challenges managers encounter in the workplace is denying workers’ requests, whether the requests are unreasonable or simply infeasible, in a way that minimizes negative outcomes. It can take courage for a worker to make a request, and many workers don’t do so unless they are firmly convinced their request is necessary and reasonable. Denying their request can be a blow to their ego, make them feel undervalued, and lead to a range of negative emotions.

And yet, it would be next to impossible to say “yes” to every worker request, especially since some of their requests are bound to contradict each other (e.g., two workers want the same office). A better solution may be to find a way to meet the fundamental need or needs upon which the request was based (you may also find the exercise Understanding Basic Human Needs helpful). This can be accomplished by asking why a certain request is being made, rather than jumping to the answer ‘no’.

The following two examples of how to ask why (rather than simply saying no) are adapted from Preventing Workplace Meltdown: An Employer’s Guide to Maintaining a Psychologically Safe Workplace (Shain & Baynton, 2011).

When an individual asks for something like the corner office with the window, rather than just telling them that those offices are reserved for workers with more status and seniority, try asking why they want the corner office. You may find that they have seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and require as much sunlight as possible to feel healthy and productive. By exploring the request instead of simply refusing it, you are now able to find another way to help meet their underlying need. You could, perhaps, approve the purchase of a small full-spectrum light box for the worker. You may have turned a potentially negative situation into a great chance to prove that you care about the worker’s welfare.

Another common example occurs when a worker asks to be transferred to another unit. If the transfer is not possible or prudent (or even if it is) you may want to ask their reason for wanting to leave, and inquire what they find unsatisfactory about their current unit. Again, this is a great opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to the worker’s well-being. Managers often note the lack of value of moving people from unit to unit in an attempt to “solve” problems. If the problem is an individual’s coping strategies, for example, their problems are highly likely to resurface after a brief honeymoon period in the new unit. If the problem happens to be the way the unit operates or interacts, it is very likely that the same problem will reappear for another worker when the first one is gone. In either case, the problem is not “solved” by a transfer; it is just delayed or relocated. By denying the transfer and addressing the reason underlying the request, on the other hand, a manager may not only enhance the worker’s job experience and loyalty, but also resolve a problem that may have been bothering others, also.

Always keep in mind that it’s best not just to say “no,” but rather to explore the request with the worker and try to find an alternative solution that will help meet his or her needs. Remember also that meeting the need can be much better than fulfilling the request. It may be easier for a worker to request a corner office than to express an unsatisfied need for recognition in the workplace. The office may be just a stand-in for a need the worker does not want to express, or possibly can’t even properly express. When a truly talented manager is able to discern workers’ unmet needs and respond to them, workers may be more content and there may be far fewer negative emotions in the workplace.
Denying a request can be especially challenging in cases where a manager solicits a worker’s opinion or input, but then must disagree or tell them “no.” From the worker’s perspective, this can make the manager’s initial request for input seem disingenuous, and the worker may doubt whether the manager was ever truly interested in receiving feedback.

It is important to understand that all requests (and behaviours) are actually an attempt to meet a need. Satisfying the need underlying a request can be just as effective as satisfying the request.

Some needs are universal, such as:

- Security
- Belonging
- Acceptance
- Recognition
- Autonomy

Although needs are universal, there are many different ways to satisfy each person’s needs. Consider the need for autonomy. One worker may have a strong need for autonomy and may want you to give them a description of the outcomes you are seeking and then leave them to determine how to reach the objectives. Other workers may find that this much latitude makes them feel insecure, and they would rather have very specific, step-by-step instructions on how each task should be carried out. These workers also value their autonomy, but balance it in a different way with their need to feel secure that they are doing their tasks correctly. Only by paying careful attention to the needs of each worker can managers hope to satisfy those needs.

When a worker makes an unreasonable request, or simply a request that cannot be fulfilled, it is important to explore what needs they were hoping to meet through the request. If you can fulfill their need, a worker may be very satisfied even if their request is denied.

Reference

Coaching Up: Help your supervisor support you through your mental illness

By: Mary Ann Baynton, MSW, RSW
   Director, Mental Health Works, CMHA, Ontario
   Reprinted courtesy of Moods Magazine www.moodsmag.com

If you are an employee experiencing depression or anxiety in the workplace, having a supportive supervisor can make a huge difference in your ability to remain productive and stay at work. Unfortunately, even well-intentioned supervisors may not know how to respond to the changes in your behaviour or performance. Fear and misunderstanding can lead to hostile reactions or disciplinary approaches.

Supervisors commonly react with avoidance or denial of the issue, even if they are generally sympathetic and capable. What may be simply a rough spot for you as an employee can expand into full-blown conflict and turmoil. Too bad all supervisors were not provided with adequate training and support! The reality is that many simply do not have a clue about how to address the symptoms of your illness in a more effective manner. This may not be their fault: training about mental health issues at work is not usually part of their education or experience. So what can you do? Turns out there is plenty and the approach is called “coaching up”.

Coaching up occurs when we provide skills training through discussion and suggestions to those we report to rather than those who report to us. What is most important about this approach is that it is done with respect for the role of the supervisor. Their job does not include becoming a counselor or working with you on personal issues. Your supervisor’s job is to help you to remain productive, so remember to focus your efforts on workplace issues. Offer your supervisor suggestions and assistance on the best ways to help you at work. After all, no one knows better than you what will help you to remain productive and get your job done.

Even if you are experiencing depression, anxiety or another mental illness, if you can still work, you are probably capable of coaching up. It will take some work on your part. You will need to be able to identify and describe your challenges and needs, and possibly you may have to be able to accept compromise.

First, take some time to think about the challenges you face during the workday. You may want to keep a brief diary of when you struggle during the day, paying attention to the following:

- Concentration – when is your concentration at its best? When is it most difficult?
- Fatigue – when are you most tired? What part of your job energizes you? What part of your job drains your energy?
- Irritability – if so, what exactly triggers it?
- Conflict – where does interpersonal conflict exist in your workplace for you?
- Deadlines – are you having trouble meeting deadlines? If so, which ones and why?
- Memory – are you forgetting things? Do you have trouble recalling facts or figures? How often and when?
Emotions – do your emotions overwhelm you? If so, what triggers them?

Change – are you able to adapt to and accept change? If not, what makes it difficult for you?

Once you have identified your challenges, think about what would be helpful for you to minimize or eliminate these obstacles to your productivity. Make sure your solutions take into account the effect they will have on others. For example, if your co-workers are ticked off because they have to do your work for you, it will not help you to feel better and recover. Consider what your supervisor can control, and what is outside their control. Also, think of solutions that are cost-effective and allow you to continue to contribute to the overall success of the organization.

Here are some ideas from people who have a mental illness and have successfully returned to or stayed at work:

Concentration
- Try to rearrange your day so that you take advantage of the time when your concentration is at its best to do your more complex tasks. Save the routine work for when you are less able to focus on details.

Fatigue
- Use the parts of the job you enjoy and that energize you to increase your ability to fight fatigue.
- In some cases, the work you enjoy is not what your co-workers enjoy. If so, trade them for work that they enjoy, but that drains you. For example, if you find filing relaxing and your co-workers dislike it, you might offer to do their filing and in exchange they take minutes at meetings for you. Be creative and be aware of what will appear as fair to everyone.
- Consider shorter, more frequent breaks to fight fatigue.
- Speak to your medical professional about how to use nutrition, exercise, sleep and the timing of medication to reduce fatigue.

Irritability
- Learn to identify your triggers and non-blaming ways of discussing them with your supervisor. Be specific, yet non-personal. For example, don’t say, “You irritate me,” (even if this is what you are thinking!) Here are some suggestions for what you might say:
  - “When instructions are given to me verbally I find it confusing,” is more effective than: “When you bark orders at me you really tick me off.” You may want to ask that instructions be given to you in an email or in writing until you feel better.
  - “I am sensitive to raised voices at the moment and will tend to react negatively,” is more effective than: “If you yell at me, why shouldn’t I yell at you?”
  - “Criticism triggers my anxiety and makes it difficult for me to focus on improvement. Making positive suggestions for change and setting a time to follow up to see if it has been done can result in the outcomes you want,” is more effective than “I need to defend myself because all you ever do is criticize me.”

www.mentalhealthworks.ca
Conflicts
Conflict is always hard on all concerned. When you have a mental illness, two important factors add to the challenge in resolving the conflict.

- When people do not understand that your behaviours are related to your health, they may react by taking your irritability or withdrawal as a personal insult.
- You may be experiencing the feeling that everyone is out to get you. This is a common symptom of many mental illnesses and makes it difficult to trust those around you.

Being aware of these two factors, you can try to suggest ways to resolve or reduce the conflict. Some ideas can be:

- Offer positive suggestions for change rather than focusing on the problem, especially if that “problem” is a person. For instance, if someone is critical of you, ask your supervisor to instruct all employees to refrain from criticizing each other. If you feel that someone dominates meetings, ask your supervisor to find a way to engage everyone equally at meetings. Try to stay away from accusing individuals and instead focus on solutions that will work for everyone.
- Offer to refrain from engaging in conflict by walking away and asking your supervisor to address the issues with co-workers.
- Suggest that your supervisor explain that you currently have a health condition that is affecting your emotions. Disclosure of diagnosis is not necessary, but explaining that your reactions are not intended to be personal may help reduce tension.
- You may wish to ask to be excused from social events for a time.

Deadlines
- Schedule more frequent meetings prior to the deadline.
- At the start of a project ask your supervisor for a thorough review of all of the resources and tasks required.
- Buddy-up with someone or delegating project overview to someone else until you are well.

Memory
You may wish to consider:

- Request information in writing.
- Use your email software for reminders.
- Carry a date book or a small pad of paper with you at all times so you can record information from “hallway” conversations that may affect your work.
- Use sticky notes on your computer and do not take them down until the task is completed.
- Record information from every call on a pad of paper. Review to ensure all calls were responded to.
Emotions
Ultimately, you are responsible for your emotions at work. If you are having a hard time staying professional during the work day, seek help from your doctor or therapist. Cognitive-behavioural therapy has been shown to be particularly effective in this regard. You can also strategize at work:
- Get permission to go for a 5-minute walk when overwhelmed.
- Identify and minimize those things that trigger your emotions.
- Ask for understanding from your supervisor while committing to doing what you can to stay well and emotionally balanced.

Change
Explaining how you would like change introduced can help your supervisor to do this in the best way possible.
- Some people prefer to know about change as soon as possible so that they can prepare.
- Others do not like the anticipation and wish to be told at the last minute.

Once you have identified all of the suggestions that you believe will support you in being a productive employee, ask your supervisor for a _-hour meeting. Be sure to suggest the meeting be held in a place where you are comfortable. Explain to your supervisor that you have a medical condition that is currently affecting your well-being and you know it may be more difficult for them to manage you in the way that has always worked before. Tell them you would like to offer a few suggestions that could help you to stay productive without costing them anything. Ask if they would mind if you shared these ideas with them. Be prepared to compromise. If some of the suggestions get adopted and others are not considered practical, you are still further ahead than if you had not coached up.

If you are unsure how reasonable your suggestions are, try them out on a trusted friend outside of the workplace before speaking with your supervisor. This can allow you to “rehearse” and be more confident when the discussion takes place, as well eliminating those ideas that may be impractical or expensive.

I am not suggesting this will be easy, but it is also not easy to continue to work while having mental health problems in a workplace where no one understands. If you can coach up, you may be able to teach someone how to be a better supervisor, not just for you, but for others who are distressed in the workplace.
Empathy in the Workplace
A Tool for Effective Leadership*

By William A. Gentry, Ph.D.,
Todd J. Weber, Ph.D., and Golnaz Sadri, Ph.D.

*This white paper is based on a poster that was presented at the Society of Industrial Organizational Psychology Conference, New York, New York, April, 2007.
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A top priority for many organizations is to look beyond traditional strategies for management development and recruitment to create a cadre of leaders capable of moving the company forward.

And no wonder. Ineffective managers are expensive, costing organizations millions of dollars each year in direct and indirect costs. Surprisingly, ineffective managers make up half of the today's organizational management pool, according to a series of studies (see Gentry, in press; Gentry & Chappelow, 2009).

With such high stakes, talent management and HR professionals as well as senior executives are pursuing multiple strategies for developing more effective managers and leaders.

Managers, too, may be surprised that so many of their peers are underperforming. It's a smart move for individual managers, then, to figure out how they rank and what skills are needed to improve their chances of success.

One of those skills, perhaps unexpectedly, is empathy.
Empathy is the ability to experience and relate to the thoughts, emotions, or experience of others. Empathy is more than simple sympathy, which is being able to understand and support others with compassion or sensitivity.

Empathy is a construct that is fundamental to leadership. Many leadership theories suggest the ability to have and display empathy is an important part of leadership. Transformational leaders need empathy in order to show their followers that they care for their needs and achievement (Bass, 1985). Authentic leaders also need to have empathy in order to be aware of others (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Empathy is also a key part of emotional intelligence that several researchers believe is critical to being an effective leader (Bar-On & Parker, 2000; George, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Empathy is one factor in relationships. For several years, CCL’s research and work with leaders has shown that the nature of leadership is shifting, placing a greater emphasis on building and maintaining relationships. Leaders today need to be more person-focused and be able to work with those not just in the next cubicle, but also with those in other buildings, or other countries. For instance, past CCL research such as the Changing Nature of Leadership or Leadership Gap or Leadership Across Difference show that leaders now need to lead people, collaborate with others, be able to cross organizational and cultural boundaries and need to create shared direction, alignment and commitment between social groups with very different histories, perspectives, values, and cultures. It stands to reason that empathy would go a long way toward meeting these people-oriented managerial and leadership requirements.

To understand if empathy has an influence on a manager’s job performance, CCL analyzed data from 6,731 managers from 38 countries. Key findings of the study are:

- Empathy is positively related to job performance.
- Empathy is more important to job performance in some cultures than others.
To better understand how leaders can be effective in their jobs, CCL conducted a study to address two key issues:

1. **Successful Job Performance:**
   Is empathy needed to be successful in a leader's job?

2. **Cross-Cultural Issues:**
   Does empathy influence success more in some cultures than others?

To answer these questions, we analyzed leaders' empathy based on their behavior. **Having empathy is not the same thing as demonstrating empathy.** Conveying empathic emotion is defined as the ability to understand what others are feeling (Duan, 2000; Duan & Hill, 1996; Goleman, 2006), the ability to actively share emotions with others, and passively experiencing the feelings of others (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006) in order to be effective.

We searched CCL's database and identified a sample of 6,731 leaders from 38 countries (see Table 1 on page 11 for the number of managers from each country and Table 2 on page 12 for demographic information). These leaders had at least three subordinates rate them on the display of empathic emotion as measured by CCL's Benchmarks® 360 instrument. Subordinates rated managers on four items:

- Is sensitive to signs of overwork in others.
- Shows interest in the needs, hopes, and dreams of other people.
- Is willing to help an employee with personal problems.
- Conveys compassion toward them when other people disclose a personal loss.

Questions were measured on a 5-point scale with 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *to a very great extent.*
Each manager in the sample also had one boss rate them on three items that measured job performance:

- “How would you rate this person’s performance in his/her present job” (1 = among the worst to 5 = among the best);
- “Where would you place this person as a leader compared to other leaders inside and outside your organization” (1 = among the worst to 5 = among the best); and
- “What is the likelihood that this person will derail (i.e., plateau, be demoted, or fired) in the next five years as a result of his/her actions or behaviors as a manager?” (1 = not at all likely to 5 = almost certain).

The Findings

Our results reveal that empathy is positively related to job performance. Managers who show more empathy toward direct reports are viewed as better performers in their job by their bosses.

The findings were consistent across the sample: empathic emotion as rated from the leader’s subordinates positively predicts job performance ratings from the leader’s boss.

While empathy is clearly important to the full sample and across all the countries in the study, the research shows that the relationship between empathy and performance is stronger in some cultures more than others.

We found that the positive relationship between empathic emotion and performance is greater for managers living in high power-distance countries, making empathy even more critical to performance for managers operating in those cultures.

Power-distance is defined as “the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be stratified and concentrated at higher levels of an organization or government” (House &
Cultures with high-power distance believe that power should be concentrated at higher levels. Such cultures believe that power provides harmony, social order and role stability. China, Egypt, Hong Kong, Malaysia, New Zealand, Poland, Singapore, and Taiwan are all considered high power-distance countries (see Table 1 on page 11).

In high power-distance cultures, paternalism characterizes leader-subordinate relationships, where a leader will assume the role of a parent and feel obligated to provide support and protection to their subordinates under their care (Yan & Hunt, 2005). The results of our study suggest that empathic emotion plays an important role in creating this paternalistic climate of support and protection to promote successful job performance in these high power-distance cultures.

Figure 1: Comparing Empathy Across Cultures. As the example below shows, empathy is more strongly tied to performance in New Zealand (a high power-distance culture) than it is in Colombia (a low power-distance culture). This distinction was found to be consistent when evaluating the importance of empathy in 38 low, mid and high power-distance countries.
To improve their performance and effectiveness, leaders may need to develop the capability to demonstrate empathy.

Some people naturally exude empathy and have an advantage over their peers who have difficulty expressing empathy. Most leaders fall in the middle and are sometimes or somewhat empathetic.

Fortunately, empathy is not a fixed trait. It can be learned (Shapiro, 2002). If given enough time and support, leaders can develop and enhance their empathy skills through coaching, training, or developmental opportunities and initiatives.

Organizations can encourage a more empathetic work place and help managers improve their empathy skills in a number of simple ways:

**Talk about empathy.** Let managers know that empathy matters. Though task-oriented skills like monitoring, planning, controlling and commanding performance or “making the numbers” are important, understanding, caring, and developing others is just as important, if not more important, particularly in today’s workforce. Explain that giving time and attention to others fosters empathy, which in turn, enhances your performance and improves your perceived effectiveness. Specific measures of empathy can be used (such as the Benchmarks assessment used in this research) to give feedback about individual and organizational capacity for empathy.
Teach listening skills. To understand others and sense what they are feeling, managers must be good listeners. Skilled listeners let others know that they are being heard, and they express understanding of concerns and problems. When a manager is a good listener, people feel respected and trust can grow. Specific listening skills include:

- **Listen to hear the meaning behind what others are saying.** Pay particular attention to nonverbal cues. Emotion expressed nonverbally may be more telling than the words people speak. Focus on tone of voice, pace of speech, facial expressions, and gestures.

- **Be an active listener.** Active listening is a person’s willingness and ability to hear and understand someone else. Active listeners are able to reflect the feelings expressed and summarize what they are hearing. There are several key skills all active listeners share:
  > They pay attention to others.
  > They hold judgment.
  > They reflect by paraphrasing information. They may say something like “What I hear you saying is...”
  > They clarify if they don’t understand what was said, like “What are your thoughts on...” or “I don’t quite understand what you are saying, could you repeat that...”
  > They summarize, giving a brief restatement on what they just heard
  > They share. They are active participants in the dialogue by saying, for example, “That sounds like something I went through.”

Encourage genuine perspective-taking. Managers consistently should put themselves in the other person’s place. As Atticus Finch in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* famously said: “You can never understand someone unless you understand their point-of-view, climb in that person’s skin or stand and walk in that person’s shoes.” For managers, this includes taking into account the personal experience or perspective of their employees. It also can be applied to solving problems, managing conflicting, or driving innovation.

Cultivate compassion. Support managers who care about how someone else feels or consider the affects that business decisions have on employees, customers and communities. Go beyond the standard-issue values statement and allow time for compassionate reflection and response.
Support global managers. The ability to be empathetic is especially important for leaders working in global organizations or across cultural boundaries (Alon & Higgins, 2005) or for leaders getting ready for expatriate assignments (Harris & Moran, 1987; Jokinen, 2005; Mendez-Russell, 2001). Working across cultures requires managers to understand people who have very different perspectives and experiences. Empathy generates an interest in and appreciation for others, paving the way to more productive working relationships.

Managers would also benefit from knowing if the “power-distance” attributes are high, medium or low in the countries in which they operate. The higher the power distance needs, the more emphasis and attention should be given to teaching (and practicing) empathy.

When managers increase their awareness and understanding of empathy (particularly in their cultural context) they can identify behaviors they can improve and situations where showing their empathy could make a difference. As managers hone their empathy skills through listening, perspective-taking, and compassion, they are improving their leadership effectiveness and increasing the chances of success in the job.

Conclusion

The opportunity costs of keeping a manager who underperforms are often weighed against the costs of recruiting, hiring and getting the new manager up to speed. But with 50 percent of managers seen as poor performers or failures in their jobs (Gentry, in press; Gentry and Chappelow, 2009) organizations must recognize the value in improving the managerial and leadership skills within their existing employee base. As one of CCL’s efforts to better understand the skills and behaviors leaders need to be effective in various parts of the world, this study examined the role that empathy plays in effective leadership.

This study found that the ability to understand what others are feeling is a skill that clearly contributes to effective leadership. In some cultures, the connection between empathy and performance is particularly striking, placing an even greater value on empathy as a leadership skill.

The reasons behind the strong correlation of empathy and effectiveness were not evaluated in this study. We presume, however, that empathetic leaders are assets to organizations, in part, because they are able to effectively build and maintain relationships – a critical part of leading organizations anywhere in the world.
References


### Number of Managers Within Each Country for the Present Study

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Power Distance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
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<td>Venezuela</td>
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Note. Classification of countries as being in High, Medium, and Low Power Distance cultures came from the chapter written by Carl, Gupta, and Javidan in the House et al. book entitled *Culture, leadership, and organizations: The GLOBE study of 62 societies.* For the purposes of this table, countries in Band A and B in the book are High (greater power distance), Band C is Medium, and Band D and E are Low (low power distance).
### Demographics of the Managers

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<td>1.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Level</td>
<td>19.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Middle Level</td>
<td>48.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Level</td>
<td>26.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Level</td>
<td>4.01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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About CCL

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) is a top-ranked, global provider of executive education that unlocks individual and organizational potential through its exclusive focus on leadership development and research. Founded in 1970 as a nonprofit, educational institution, CCL helps clients worldwide cultivate creative leadership – the capacity to achieve more than imagined by thinking and acting beyond boundaries – through an array of programs, products and other services. Ranked among the world’s top providers of executive education by BusinessWeek and the Financial Times, CCL is headquartered in Greensboro, NC, with campuses in Colorado Springs, CO; San Diego, CA; Brussels, Belgium; Moscow, Russia; and Singapore. Its work is supported by more than 450 faculty members and staff.

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