

9 tips to listen well and build empathy with co-workers

Most workplace interactions stay at the surface level. This may seem fine — the work gets done, after all. But what insights might you miss by not connecting more deeply with your co-workers? And who might be excluded or feel unsupported when you don't make the effort to learn what they care about?



Everyone stands to gain when you devote a few extra minutes to engaging with co-workers and listening — really listening — to what they have to say. That's the essence of building empathy for others: getting to know who they are in order to better relate to their experiences.

When you listen to build empathy, you'll open your mind to others' diverse perspectives. You'll be less likely to make biased assumptions based on surface-level traits like skin color or accent or whether or not someone's outgoing. Your co-workers will feel heard and respected. People will form stronger connections and, ultimately, work together more effectively.

Empathy is a muscle you can build through daily interactions. Here are techniques to get you started.

1. Seek out opportunities to connect more deeply during your workday.

Most everyone has room to connect in a more meaningful way with co-workers, even social butterflies who make a point of saying "hi" to the entire office. Ask yourself: When I stop to chat in the hallway or ask for input on a project, do I tend to cut the conversation short? When I do bond with people at work, are they usually those who look or act like me, share my views, or do the same job I do?

If so, challenge yourself to go deeper with someone you don't know well — maybe someone you've formed a superficial or potentially biased opinion of (for example, "*Harman always leaves right at 5pm; he must not be very social*" or "*Amy is older than I am, so we probably don't have much in common*").

Consider ways you could spark conversation during the regular flow of your workday. For example, take time to talk when someone says “hi” in the office break room or walk a different route through the job site so you encounter people you might not otherwise. Or make a point of sitting next to someone new at a company event or happy hour, inviting a peer in another department to grab lunch, or joining a newly formed committee. What else? Opportunities to connect are all around you if you pay attention and take initiative.

2. Ask curious, open-ended questions to invite meaningful conversation.

In the rush of the workday, it's easy to shut down conversations before they have a chance to take root; you have meetings to get to and tasks to finish, and so does the other person. But even in brief encounters, it's possible to invite a genuine, substantive exchange. Try asking one or two questions that show you're interested in learning more about the other person's perspective and life.

For example, let's say you see a peer, Mila, sitting in the break room:

You: “Hi, Mila, how are you doing?”

Mila: “It’s been a pretty stressful week — so much for catching up on sleep!”

Poor:

You: “Oh, sorry to hear that. Good luck.”

Mila: “Yeah. Thanks.”

Better:

You: “I'm sorry to hear that. What's been happening?”

Mila: “Well, I have a big presentation to the executive team on Thursday.”

You: “That sounds intense. How has your preparation been going?”

3. Show that you're paying attention with eye contact and open body language.

Turn your phone over. Put down your sandwich. And give the conversation your full attention. Especially when you're speaking with someone outside your usual circles, showing warmth and engagement helps the other person feel comfortable.

How much eye contact is too much? That depends on your situation and cultural norms. If you feel like you're entering staring territory, periodically shift your gaze to the speaker's hands or elsewhere as you process what you're hearing.

Also consider the position of your body relative to the other person's. Aim to be on the same level as you talk, so you don't create an uncomfortable or unequal power dynamic by, for example, standing over the other person while they sit, standing or sitting too close, or walking two steps ahead instead of side by side.

Finally, keep your body language open, with arms uncrossed, shoulders relaxed, and your body facing the speaker. Send signals that you're fully participating by nodding to show encouragement or keeping a neutral expression for difficult points.

4. Use silence or brief prompts to encourage the other person to share more.

Complete thoughts rarely tumble out of people's mouths perfectly formed, especially if they're talking about a personal or complex subject.

When the other person pauses or stops talking, you may be tempted to respond with your own perspective, especially if you're trying hard to connect (*"I know just how you feel!"*) or your problem-solving urge kicks in (*"Well, have you tried ...?"*).

Instead of rushing to fill the void and inadvertently trampling the message they're trying to communicate, use silence (waiting as long as 10 seconds before prompting), or prompt with a well-placed *"Mm hmm"* or *"Tell me more"* to invite the other person to share more.

For example:

Mila: “I put together some graphs I hope the executive team will like.”

You: “Mm-hmm.”

Mila: “The graphs really make the case for why we should increase our IT budget next year.”

You: “That sounds promising.”

Mila: “I don’t know ... ”

You: [silent, but nodding]

Mila: “Well, I'm not sure I can convince them. I just wish I didn’t get so nervous in front of higher-ups.”

Note: If someone isn’t sharing much, you could try another open-ended question (“*Oh, what makes you say that?*”) or an observation (“*I can tell this is important to you*”), but be careful not to force the issue if they seem uncomfortable or not open to talking about the subject.

5. Consider the other person’s tone and body language — and respond accordingly.

Is the person crossing her arms or looking downward? Or is he speaking fast and making a lot of hand gestures? Nonverbal cues are often meaningful signals about the person’s feelings and attitudes that may otherwise go unspoken.

You can use this information to calibrate your responses in a way that demonstrates understanding and encourages greater openness. For example, if the person has crossed arms or isn’t making eye contact, you might say:

“It seems like this is a difficult topic. Understandably so ... but I'm interested to hear more if you're willing to share.”

Or, if the person is excitedly expressing his or her thoughts and gesturing:

“It sounds like you’re really excited about your presentation. I'd like to hear more about it.”

6. After the other person has fully expressed his or her thought, paraphrase back what you’ve heard to ensure you understand correctly.

Paraphrasing — offering a summary of what you’ve heard — can be a powerful tool for building empathy. It can illuminate gaps in your understanding, demonstrate your engagement as a listener, and help the

other person refine his or her thoughts. It's also a good way to make sure that two people from different backgrounds (be it different departments or different cultures) are seeing the issue in the same way, with nothing lost in translation.

Start with phrases like:

- *"It sounds as if ..."*
- *"If I'm understanding right, you ..."*
- *"To make sure I understand, you're saying that ..."*

And follow up with *"Do I have that right?"* so the other person has the opportunity to tell you if you got it right or to further clarify.

For example:

“It sounds as if you feel good about your budget request, but nervous about delivering it to the executives. Do I have that right?”

For more, see [Paraphrase back what you hear to improve understanding.](#)

7. Acknowledge and validate the other person's feelings — without imposing your judgment.

Nobody wants to share something only to be preached at or criticized.

Even well-intentioned listeners can trip up in their desire to provide an answer, commiserate, or present an alternate opinion — and end up coming off as dismissive or judgmental. When you do chime in with your own thoughts, do so in a way that shows you understand how the other person feels and why. Focus on what the person is saying and feeling, not on how it makes you feel about the speaker or how you want to reply.

For example, if Mila says, *"I've worked hard on my presentation, but I'm worried the executive team won't approve my request,"* you might respond:

Poor options:

“I know what you mean! The executive team is impossible to please.”

“Have you tried practicing in front of a mirror?”

Better:

“That does sound stressful. It makes sense that you'd be worried about it, given the stakes and how much work you've put into preparing.”

Keep in mind: This kind of validation doesn't necessarily mean that you share the same views or feelings as the speaker. But it does show that you understand their views and feelings and think they matter. This is especially important to convey if a co-worker feels marginalized at work (for example, when they think they are being treated unfairly or nobody listens to their ideas).

8. Think about what you have to offer the other person — and whether it would be truly helpful.

In many conversations, providing a listening ear to acknowledge what the other person says or to learn more about them is often all you need to do to help the other person feel understood and build a stronger relationship.

In other cases, it might make sense for you to ask open-ended questions to try and expand the person's view of the situation (*"What about presentations in the past where you've felt confident — how did you prepare for those?"*), or directly offer to help (*"If you think a practice session would help, I'd be happy to hear a run-through of your presentation."*). If you're not sure what's appropriate, rather than risk offering help someone doesn't want and coming off as patronizing, try asking: *"Is there anything I can do to help?"*

After the conversation, you might also consider how your newfound perspective could influence your view of the person and your future behavior. For example, you might gain respect for a co-worker you learn spends weekends volunteering or has expertise and a willingness to help you with a relevant project. Or, if you learn that a peer feels overlooked, you might look for ways to subtly draw attention to his or her ideas in meetings.

9. When it's time to wrap up, consider expressing your willingness to continue the conversation in the future.

If you feel you've had a meaningful conversation, why not say so? You'll reinforce your connection with the other person and pave the way for future interactions. For example:

You: "Thanks for taking the time to talk, Mila. I appreciate the conversation."

Mila: "Yeah, me too. It's nice to know someone understands how stressful these presentations can be."

You: "Sure thing. And I'm definitely interested to hear how it goes."
