

Empathy

When People Get Emotional

Henry Ford once said, “How come when I want a pair of hands I get a human being as well?” Do you ever feel that way? Just when you think things are going well, someone gets all upset. If that person’s problem was something that could kill the project, you would get upset, too, but so many times it is some dinky little thing that gets blown out of proportion.

Have you ever had a bad day? How about a bad week? Have you ever had a bad year? Often, when we get upset, there is a whole lot more to the story than the thing that got us upset. The question is, what do we do about people’s feelings when we want to get work done?

Some of us would say, “Don’t worry about it, it will go away in time.” Others might get upset, too and join in, escalating the problem and making it worse. Then, there are those who will tell you, “It’s against the rules to get upset, we don’t do that here.”

Regardless of how you feel about the problem, it is real to the other person. If you dismiss it, you invalidate the other person and create a barrier. Feelings are real. If a person says, “I feel sad,” it is inappropriate to respond with, “You shouldn’t feel that way.” The fact is, the feeling of sadness is a genuine feeling for that person.

Here is the challenge. People will never become robots. They do have emotions and if we cannot work with them, we are not going to get the results we want. Some people don’t see this as a problem because they just naturally have fabulous interpersonal skills. Without even trying, they know when to talk, what to say and when to be quiet. They even remember people’s names and birthdays. However, many of us have difficulty with this. We simply don’t know what to do. For example, a senior executive we know said, “How come people tell me I am cold and uncaring when I know that is totally untrue?” Our initial response was, “It is not that you are cold and uncaring, it is that you come across as cold and uncaring.” Being a logical person, he worked on figuring this out by observing what empathetic people do in business situations when emotions pop up. We will share with you what he learned.

The executive reviewed a recent business setback. His boss had criticized him and he was upset because he felt it was unfair. He did not know what to do so he went to a trusted friend’s office, closed the door, and vented. In a short time, he calmed down and felt better. Thinking back and replaying the conversation, he realized what his friend did and why it worked. The friend responded to what he said with words like, “oh, wow, and humm.” These words provided a response without taking a position, and the way they were spoken indicated that the friend was listening. The problem did not get solved right then, but his feelings were acknowledged. Once his feelings were acknowledged the emotions started to dissipate and the executive could deal logically with the problem.

From this example we developed a technique for handling just about any emotionally charged situation. Because it is simple, it is easy to remember, and easy to apply:

Say something that validates feeling, but stay neutral on the issues if front of you

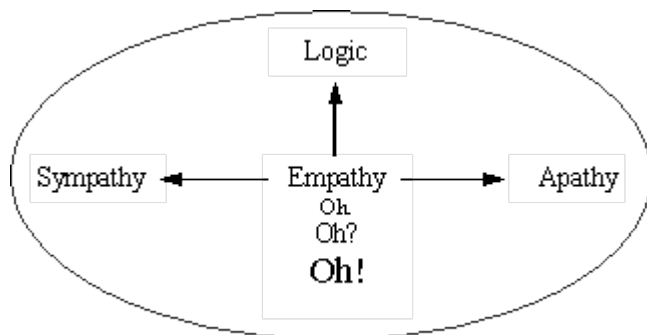
There is a word that expresses a great deal of feeling based on how you say it. The word is, “Oh.” Say “Oh” out loud and see how many ways you can say it. For example,

John says, “I had car problems this morning.”
You reply, “Oh?”
John says, “Yes, it is going to cost me \$2,549 to get it fixed.”
You reply, “Oh!”

Notice in the above conversation, you are expressing concern without actually saying anything. It gives the other person time to tell the whole story and it gives you time to think about what you will say, when it is appropriate. We avoided a trap. We did not get drawn into the problem prematurely.

After we establish empathy, emotions can start going down and both parties will be ready to take the next step. There was a branch manager we know who was in charge of customer service reps. They had a high stress job because all day long they got customer complaints and they had to be nice no matter what the customer said. From time-to-time a customer service rep would show up in the branch manager’s office all upset. Earlier in his career he would immediately go into his problem solving mode and try to fix the problem. Even though he had good intentions, it did not seem to work. Over time he learned that the best thing to do in this situation was to listen and respond with empathy. After hearing the whole story, he would ask, “What do you want me to do about it?” Usually, he was told, “Nothing, but thanks for listening.” He had learned to apply the “Oh” technique and it worked. Reps knew he was listening and he cared. If he had asked his question earlier in the process it would not have worked because the other person was not ready for it.

When in doubt, your first move should be to listen and respond with empathy. There are other responses, but they typically don’t work due to a problem of timing. They are out of sync with the other person’s feelings. Take a look at our model of how to respond; empathy is in the middle.



Let’s look at an authoritative definition of empathy. It is a word that is often confused with sympathy. Empathy, as defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* means “Identification with and understanding of another’s situation, feelings, and motives.” Sympathy is defined as, “A

relationship or an affinity between people or things in which whatever affects one correspondingly affects the other.” Notice how sympathy is more intense than empathy. With empathy I understand your feelings, whereas with sympathy, I actually participate in what you are feeling right now. The problem with sympathy is if you are angry, breaking pencils, and throwing them up against the wall, what would I accomplish by joining in your anger and throwing pencils at against the wall, too? With empathy, I express understanding without joining in your anger. The power of empathy is that I keep a clear head and can make a decision on the appropriate next step.

The next item to talk about from our graphic is apathy. The dictionary defines it as, “Lack of interest or concern, especially regarding matters of general importance or appeal; indifference.” The apathetic approach to the person who is angry and throwing broken pencils, is to ignore that persona and avoid getting involved in any way. An apathetic person is seen as aloof and uncaring.

Let’s put this all together using the graphic. Here is an example. A teammate comes up to you steaming with anger and says, “I’m quitting because we never get any upper management support when we need it.” If you were to immediately jump to logic, and prove that we really do get a good amount of management support, you could get into an instant argument, and go nowhere quickly. If you jump to sympathy, you will steam with anger, too, and quit your job. If you choose apathy, you might say, “Get a life,” and walk away.

Let’s try this with empathy as a starting point. The first thing you will say is, “Oh,” and you will let the person talk. After that the other three alternatives are open to you and with a clear head, you can pick the one that is most appropriate. If the next step is logic, you might say, “How can I help you with this?” If you pick sympathy, you might share your feelings and say, “This drives me crazy, too.” You might see that apathy is the best choice and say, “I’m sorry, but there is nothing we can do about it and I need my job so I am going to press on as if nothing happened.”

Listening and responding with empathy is a great starting point in a conflict situation, but it is not the endpoint. You still have to deal with the issues and that may be hard work over an extended period of time. What we have offered here is a technique for staying positive while acknowledging other people’s feelings. After that, you make choices on what to do to move the situation along.

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