

WHITE PAPER

EMPATHY AT WORK

5 TIPS TO INCREASE TRUST & UNDERSTANDING IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE

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ANCIENT WISDOM

Once there was a Turtle and Crane who lived around three great lakes. Both spent their days feeding on the plentiful fish and seaweed in the lakes, largely ignoring each other.

One day it started to rain and it didn't stop. For 30 days it rained causing a massive flood. The lakes continued to swell until the three lakes became one, massive deep sea. For the Turtle, this was wonderful. She had new areas to explore, fish to chase and new grasses on which to feed. The Turtle prospered. For the Crane though, the floods were a disaster.

The water was so deep, he couldn't stand in the water and was unable to hunt fish. The situation was dire, if he couldn't catch fish he was going to die. One day, the Turtle came to the surface and saw the Crane circling overhead, tired and hungry. The Turtle let her shell protrude from the water and let the Crane stand on her back. From here, he could now hunt, catch fish and survive.

Every day, instead of spending her days simply exploring and eating, the Turtle would offer the Crane her back until the waters receded and the three lakes were back to normal.



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Many years later, after months of scorching heat and not a cloud in the sky, there was a great drought. The three lakes dried until they were reduced to small water holes and muddy puddles.

This was wonderful for the Crane. He could walk around the shallows and easily catch the fish trapped in these small ponds, but for the Turtle this was terrible. She struggled to move in the thick mud, she was unable to find enough food and became tired and hungry. The Crane saw this, so each day he would pick her up and carry her from pond to pond to help her find food and survive.

I heard this story when I was travelling through Vietnam. At first, the lesson I took away was one of charity, helping others in need when they are down on their luck, but I believe the story is a deeper lesson on empathy and trust.

Within businesses, teams, families and communities nothing builds trust more than helping others generously and authentically. At no point did the Turtle make her support of the Crane conditional.

The commitment of reciprocation wasn't demanded or even explicitly stated. The relationship was built on understanding the needs of the other. What follows when we build relationships on deep understanding, is trust which leads to commitment.

Deep understanding of the needs, wants and desires of a person is the key first step to building trust. Once needs are understood, action is needed. It is not enough to just think



about it. The Turtle didn't just know that the Crane needed help, she took action. Trust is built in practice of understanding in action. It is this active demonstration of trust that unlocks the commitment needed for relationships to be high performing.

To do this effectively, we need to be able to suspend our own beliefs, desires and needs, sitting openly and with wonder for them.

**THIS INVOLVES THE
MISUNDERSTOOD AND
ELUSIVE SKILL OF
PRACTICING EMPATHY.**

WHAT IS EMPATHY?

When the word empathy arises in a presentation or training session, people often have interesting reactions. I often notice eye-rolls from the hard-nosed, analytical types in the room worried we are about to drop into the world of soft and fluffy, hugs and cuddles.

A world they fear won't deliver results. This soon fades once they realise that investment in real connections leads to people who are committed and very tangible results. The other, equally dangerous reaction I see in

I audiences when I talk about empathy is one of bright-eyed excitement.

The people who just love long conversations, who see business relationships as an extension of their friendships, who want everyone to like them and think empathy is the path to being loved.

This is wrong.

Empathy is not about being loved for your subservience, it is about building understanding and trust. Trust is our goal and trust is different from affection. In business, I need to trust people, but I don't have to like them.

This is not to say that you can't have both. I don't need to like my dentist before she puts a drill in my mouth, but I sure need to trust her. And as much as I like my friend Neil, I would never trust him to do a root canal.

Too often we get these mixed up. The Turtle and the Crane never needed to form a relationship based on love, affection or even politeness. They each had to understand the needs of the other, and by authentically serving in those interests, built the trust that drives commitment.

Once you do understand someone, you may well develop an affection and fondness for the person, but trust is critical to a strong relationship.



Many of us have good friends through business and certainly work can be much more enjoyable when we work with people whom we like. The important point is not to ignore liking people, but that friendship is not the goal. Trust is the key to high performance culture and empathy helps us build trust.

"OKAY SMART GUY, SO HOW DO YOU PRACTICE EMPATHY?"

Here are 5 simple steps you can take to inspire more empathy and understanding in your teams:

TIP 1: ASK "WHAT ELSE?"

Always ask "What else might be true?" Our brains are incredible systems. With around 85 billion neurons connected through trillions of electrical and chemical pathways, they are the most complex system in the known Universe... but they are not perfect.

Our brains are constantly using assumptions, shortcuts and mental models to understand the world based on the information presented. These models present an often hidden danger. When it comes to understanding other people, we are prone to think our own views are naturally correct.

We tend to make quick judgments based on stereotypes, generalisations and assumptions that have served us in the past. This is a natural process of the brain and one we need to overcome for empathy.

When someone makes a statement or assumption about someone else, start asking the question: "What else might be true?"



In workshops, we will often start with a decision, for example, a customer didn't buy a product.

We then ask why? The first reaction might be that it was too expensive. We then push participants to write as many possible reasons for the same decision, exhausting all possibilities.

Maybe it was the product quality? A lack of real need? Price was too low? Not enough information? Other decision makers involved? Family issues? Bad timing? They don't like us?

This can be a long list. While we don't know for sure, it opens people up to alternative possibilities and saves them from anchoring on their initial assumption. By expanding the possibilities, the team can explore more options to improve in the future rather than the old price chestnut.



TIP 2: CLEAR YOUR DESK

The only thing noisier than the modern world is the modern mind. We are bombarded with a constant stream of complex, impactful and attention-seeking information. It is well documented that busyness hurts innovation and creativity. Research from Bar-Ilan University in Israel found high mental loads consistently diminish originality and creativity. When given different amounts of numbers to remember, people understandably struggled to be as creative.

For instance, when researchers said "white," participants were asked to name whatever related word first popped into their heads while retaining a series of digits. "Participants with seven digits to recall resorted to the most statistically common responses (e.g. white/black), whereas participants with two digits gave less typical, more varied pairings (e.g. white/cloud)" explained researcher Moshe Bar.

So now imagine you are meeting with a colleague in your office or making a phone call to a client in front of your computer. What does the scene look like? Are there a variety of papers, magazines, post-it notes and other clutter staring you in the face? Do you have a few browsers open on your computer, flicking between screens? Maybe email notifications are popping up and instant messages are coming in as you speak? Do you check your mobile as it buzzes up notifications from your best friend's Facebook?

You need to know that you are not really listening. To build empathy, we need to be consciously curious. We need full attention to pick up on the subtle signals and emotional cues in others. Humans cannot multitask, it is a myth. When we try to do multiple things, we shift our attention from the person we are speaking with to the distraction.

While distracted, we almost completely shut down the comprehension from the person. Our brains then make up the missing bits with assumptions and we carry on. This is disrespectful. If the other person notices, your level of trust will be diminished and even if they don't notice, you won't understand them as well as you need. Clean your desk. Clear any paper and put away files, even turn off your screen if you can before making a call or sitting down for a discussion. Clear away distractions so you can be fully present.

You will gain more insight, improve empathy and build trust.

TIP 3: LEARN TO SHUT UP

When 38 year old Larry sat down to discuss his drinking, he wanted to make one thing clear: "I like to have a drink sometimes [but] I do not, and I repeat do not have a problem with alcohol or wine".

However, as the conversation progressed, the interviewer, determined to explore Larry's drinking habit, used the incredible power of silence to expert effect. I encourage you to read the transcription below and take note of the Interviewer's pauses.

As you will observe in this interview from the paper 'Analysing the significance of silence in qualitative interviewing', Bengtsson and Fynbo, 2017, there is an incredible power in silence. When you are speaking with someone, maintain eye contact and connection, but resist the temptation to speak.

We so often are uncomfortable with silence, either filling it with questions or disconnecting by glancing away. We are sometimes so compelled by our own desires and needs, we rush through a list of questions like a checklist, missing the depth of understanding required for real empathy.

Often, the question you really want answered doesn't need to be voiced to be heard. Silence allows space for the other person to fill without constraint. It gives licence for the person to develop their answers and thoughts, not to feel pressured or rushed.

It helps you to navigate past the rehearsed answers and explore the real meaning that is tucked away. Skilled use of silence can provide incredible levels of understanding!

'From Analysing the significance of silence in qualitative interviewing', Bengtsson and Fynbo, 2017

Interviewer: It's just that you said that on most days you had more than five drinks at work before going home to the family.

Larry: Yes.

Interviewer: [silence, 5 seconds].

Larry: At least.

Interviewer: [silence, 5 seconds].

Larry: Whenever I feel that I have to slow down a little, I just take a taxi home. Just like that.

Interviewer: [silence, 5 seconds] Then what?

Larry: What do you mean?

Interviewer: When you come home.

Larry: What?

Interviewer: [silence, 4 seconds] Do you then... [silence, 6 seconds]?

Larry: Well, yes. Of course.

Interviewer: 'Of course' what?

Larry: Then I probably open a couple of beers or a bottle of wine. I make Irish coffee, watch a movie. I don't want to make a fool of myself so I drink when I get home instead. I

don't mind doing that.

Interviewer: [silence, 3 seconds] Where's your boundary?

Larry: Damn, that's a difficult question.

Interviewer: [silence, 9 seconds].

Larry: I just think that as long as I take care of my responsibilities, professionally and in the family, then... [silence, 3 seconds]. Of course I drink some beer once in a while and some wine too. It's normal. That's all there's to it.

Interviewer: [silence, 6 seconds].

Larry: If circumstances were different, if I were wasting my time down at the local pub every day until late at night, then I'd have a problem. But I don't.

Interviewer: [silence, 3 seconds].

Larry: I'm just an ordinary kind of person.

Interviewer: [silence, 9 seconds].

Larry: It's true that I've tried to jump out into the deep, been far out, out on the other side of my limit. But that's a different story.



TIP 4: CHECK YOUR CONTEXT

Growing up in the late 80's, many Australian's had a laughed at American tourists who seemed disappointed kangaroos weren't hopping down the streets of Sydney. While the knowledge of visitors has changed, past tourists down under seemed to think the rivers were full of crocodiles and the Akubra was a standard issue head wear.

It wasn't entirely their fault. For many Americans, Australia remains such an incredibly distant land. It was rare to know anyone who had travelled there. The main exposure American tourists had to Australia was one hour and forty-four minutes of Paul Hogan's exploits in Crocodile Dundee. That wonderful illusion of the wild lands of Australia was all they had to go by.

Our own world's have context. We walk down familiar streets, rarely surprised by the usual goings on. Kids spraying graffiti in Melbourne lane ways or seagulls swarming on hot chips at Manly beach, if this is our usual environment, we've likely seen it all before. We know this place, we understand the context of all the usual occurrences and how the ecosystem works. Our mistake is we assume everyone else does too.

Context is a powerful force in our lives. People from other countries, cities or even suburbs can have completely different contexts to us. Someone from North Queensland might think your complaints about the humidity in Sydney ridiculous, but also be stunned by the traffic that you think is actually flowing pretty well.

Context shapes how we see the world and understanding that others don't necessarily share yours is vital for real understanding. Practice parking your context. Ask people about their background, where they grew up and what that was like? Sometimes people think this is awkward in a business setting and irrelevant prying into their personal lives. But the reality is, we all bring our personal lives to work with us. If we don't, we are probably disengaged and should look for a new career path.

Most people love reminiscing about their childhood or university years. We often have a strong sense of pride in the places we were raised and are more that happy to share a quick story to give a sense of how it shaped us. Understanding a human history is exploring the building blocks of someone's belief systems, it is a difficult but noble endeavour and one that will certainly help to build rapport, trust and understanding.



TIP 5: BE GENUINELY KIND

Few things open the doors of trust and connection more powerfully than a simple act of kindness. It was 2:00am when my flight from Singapore landed in Mumbai. Even at this time of the night, the city was bustling. I managed to find the car that had been arranged by the hotel, but was struggling to keep my eyes open after a long week of meetings. I couldn't wait to lay in a real bed and get a few good hours of sleep.

The car pulled up at the hotel and I was greeted by one of the biggest smiles I had ever seen. Vijay shook my hand with warmth and kindness. I was checked in and Vijay walked me to my room pointing to the restaurants, gym, pool on the way. After a few hours of sleep, time zone confusion had me up early so I decided to head to the gym.

As I walked near the lobby, Vijay appeared with the same beaming smile. "Mr Daniel, please how can I help?" I mentioned I was heading to the gym. Vijay happily escorted me, telling me not to use the towels in the cupboard, he'd bring me a fresh one. He said he was so happy to see me again and asked me if he could bring me some of his wife's cooking for me to try. He did. It was incredible!

For a week, Vijay showered me with hospitality and kindness. Upon leaving, I handed him an envelope. It had 3,000 rupees inside, about \$60. He opened it, shook my hand and gave me one last beaming smile, this time with a sparkle in his eye.

Kindness can start in many ways, but Vijay taught me the importance of being generous first. His spirit and warmth were genuine and his enthusiasm for helping was beautifully authentic. Kindness can be small but it is very powerful.

Too often in today's workplace, we build elaborate rewards systems and recognition programs complicated by rules and websites. What people really need is for you to be authentically kind. Don't expect something in return, nor wait for a specific catalyst. Be kind to people and it will spread. Be the infectious light that brightens someone's day. Being kind may well open doors but just the act of caring will give you real insight into the challenges of others.

Try this little tip: spend 5 minutes on a Sunday thinking of someone who has been kind to you in the week. Write a short message thanking them for how they helped you and send it to them. I usually add that there is no need for them to reply, I just wanted them to know I was grateful. You'll be amazed the impact it will have on them, and you.

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For more information on how Empathic Consulting can support with specific programs and the key steps to implementation, contact:

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