



In its purest sense, empathy is the ability to understand somebody else's why.

Like most words, it has lots of definitions.

I chose this one as my favorite- and yes, I know it comes from Wikipedia- because I love the second half of this.

The beginning starts like most definitions of empathy- that it's the capacity to understand what another person is experiencing.

But the italics (which are mine) say- 'from within the other person's frame of reference.'

Sometimes when we try to be empathetic, we take what someone is doing or thinking or saying and put it into our own frame of reference.

'Okay, this is what I would do' or 'this is how I would respond. This is what I would think about it.'

But in order to fully practice empathy, we need to do the best we can to take whatever is being said or done or thought and try to understand it from within the other person's frame of reference.

Here's the tricky part. We also understand that we're never going to be able to do that completely. We're not this other person so we can never fully understand but we can do our best. We can do our best to understand and listen as they explain it to us. I try as best I can to exhibit this empathy through the Platinum Rule.

The Platinum Rule unfortunately is not as well known as its cousin the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule tells us that I should do to you what I would want you to do to me. Sounds good, right? But the Platinum Rule takes it to a whole other level of empathy because what the Platinum Rule says is, 'I should do to you what you want me to do to you.'

Let's think of it in terms of food. I like to think about food. If it's my birthday and I want to eat ice cream cake for my birthday because that's my favorite cake and when it's somebody else's birthday if I employ the Golden Rule, then I will do for them what I would want them to do for me. Then I would get them the ice cream cake. But maybe they don't like ice cream cake. (Imagine!)

If I'm using the Platinum Rule, I would realize that even though I would want ice cream cake, the person whose birthday it is prefers chocolate cake, so I would get them the cake that they would want me to get for them. That's the Platinum Rule.

I tried to get creative with this slide. This is about the level of my creativity to create this kind of yin-yang.

I put this one right in the middle of the two because it's a little controversial- using empathy to get what you want.



It seems a little backwards right? We're taught that empathy is sort of an unselfish act. That we're trying our best to put ourselves in somebody else's shoes and understand where they're coming from. But I intentionally included this because there are ways to use empathy in its purest sense of understanding what someone else's reason is to help you out, too. Sometimes I refer to this as learning how to speak someone else's language.

An important tenet of communication is understanding what the other person cares about. If you need something from them, being able to frame it in a way that they care about is going to give you a much better chance of getting it.

I don't intend for this to sound sinister because being empathetic is very noble and very important to our relationships. It's also a fact that in order to get the things we need we have to understand what the other person in the equation cares about.

When we are participating in things like negotiating for a job offer or a raise or more flex time or time off, we know why we want those things and why we care about those things. If we have to plead our case to someone who ultimately makes that decision, then it's really helpful to frame what we're asking for based on what they care about.

Why would they care if we have time off?

Why would they care if we had a better salary?

What is the language that they speak?

What do they care about?

How can I frame my request based on what they care about to better my chances of getting it?

This is incredibly helpful when you're managing up or when you're working with colleagues. When you're not their supervisor, it's a very different relationship than when you're supervising someone. What does your boss care about when you have conversations with them? When you need something from them? Are you only ever presenting it based on what you need and are you successful doing that?

If so, by all means, continue but if you're butting heads then you can think about reframing what you're asking for based on what your boss cares about.

I use this example all the time with one of my bosses who was really moved by stories.

They just loved to hear stories. I really liked to present things with numbers. So I would walk into a meeting with my boss and say, 'hey boss- our enrollment went up 50% and our reading scores went up 22% and... '

It was like two different languages.



When I could finally understand what my boss cared about, I would come in and say, 'let me tell you about this student. And let me tell you about their reading and how it went up and what the effect of that was.'

I promise you, I'm not being dramatic or extra, sometimes they would have tears in their eyes. That's how moved they were by stories. So I had to adjust the way that I asked for the things that I needed. It might feel manipulative- I understand that inclination. But it's an effective way to communicate more effectively because ultimately it becomes a win-win. You're giving someone else what they want and you're also getting what you want.

This is true in any partnerships you have, particularly if you're in a situation where you have to share space which can be really, really tense and cause a lot of problems.

When you're writing grants.

Yes, you have your own needs and reasons for writing that grant, but what do your funders care about?

What do they want to hear in order for you to be able to get the money that you need?

What about when you're recruiting students or when you're recruiting people to work for you?

Think about how you can frame your communication if you want to take the word empathy out of it.

If that just feels too weird to you, do that.

Know that this is how you can help yourself get things done.

Frame them in a way that the other person hears it because that's what they care about.

So, something for you to think about is, how can you increase your empathy to lead more effectively?