

Empathic Communication in High-Stress Situations (Page 1)

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This advice was originally generated for corporate and government managers trying to cope empathically with outraged stakeholders, where stress is very high indeed. But it applies also to consultants trying to cope empathically with their clients, especially in high-stress situations but perhaps even in ordinary ones.

Recognize why you're not keen to work on your empathy skills.

Here are seven reasons why my clients resist learning how to deal more empathically with their stakeholders:

- “I’m empathic already – as is proved by my successful career.”
- “I don’t need to be empathic. It’s enough that I’m right.”
- “I don’t want to be empathic with those S.O.B.s.”
- “I can’t afford to be empathic – the lawyers won’t let me.”
- “You can’t teach empathy anyway. It’s intuitive.”
- “There’s nothing there to teach. It’s obvious.”
- “I’m too preoccupied with my own ego to be empathic.”

The first step toward becoming more empathic is noticing some of the reasons why you haven’t done so already.

The Foundational Course

1. Listen.

People want to tell you their story. They don’t want you to know it already or tell them you’ve figured it out when they’re halfway through. They don’t want you to half-listen; that’s why you must nod your head, take notes, and murmur uh-huh. And they really don’t want you to tell them your story instead. You listen not just because there are things to be learned, but also because other people want to talk.

Listening is especially important in high-stress situations; people come to public meetings, for example, mostly in order to vent. Before you can accomplish anything else, you must listen to them vent. The balance is different with clients; they’re paying for your time and want to hear what you have to say. But more than I used to realize, clients want to vent too.

2. Echo what you heard.

Skillful echoing shows people that you really heard what they said. And it gives them another shot at saying it correctly. When they hear it echoed, they’ll often tell you that’s not quite right ... and then say the important stuff they left out on their first try. To encourage that second shot, make your echoes tentative: “Let me see if I’ve heard you right. You seem to be making three main points....”

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That kind of echo also functions as a transition; they're done for the moment and now it's your turn. But there are two other kinds of echoes worth mastering. Echoes in the middle of the other person's monologue have to be very brief, so they don't interrupt the flow. Perhaps most valuable (and certainly most flattering) are echoes in the middle of your own monologue: "As you pointed out earlier...."

3. Ask questions.

Questioning is more assertive than echoing. "Let me see if I'm hearing you right. Do you mean....? I wonder if you might also be worried about...." So questioning is a good tool of hypothesis-testing, to see if your empathic judgments are on target.

The trick is to ask questions that open up the conversation, rather than shutting it down. Some guidelines:

- Make sure the question doesn't presuppose a particular answer.
- Try deflecting the question. (See #7.)
- Try putting the question in the form of a statement. ("I wonder if....")
- Ask open-ended questions – essay questions, not true-false or multiple-choice. "What happened next?"
- Don't start with the hardest questions.
- Give the other person permission to be reticent.

4. Find things to agree with and points to add.

I call this the "yes, and" strategy. Ultimately it's very hard to be empathic if you're a blank screen. Your clients certainly want to hear something of your feelings and thoughts; after all, they're paying for them! Even hostile stakeholders, who started out wanting you to shut up and listen while they vent, soon begin to wonder what your reactions are. Especially early in a relationship, it is useful to voice some agreement – not with everything, but with specific things the other person is saying. Then take his or her point another step in a new direction. "I really resonated strongly when you said.... Another aspect of that, almost a corollary, I think, is...."

It's pretty easy to deploy the "yes, and" strategy when the other person says something new you really want to agree with and build on. It's a lot harder when the other person says something you were planning to say yourself; it's right there on page 35 of your deck. Empathic communicators don't say "I'll get to that." Instead they agree now, and build on the point now – and skip right past page 35 when they get to it. The more of your points you get to make via "yes, and" rather than via your prepared remarks, the better.

5. Find things to voice reservations about.

Agreement is "yes, and." Disagreement is "yes, but." Establishing yourself as an authentic person whose views add value means showing that you don't always agree. You have your own feelings and opinions, which are sometimes discrepant from the other person's. "Yes, buts" should be rationed, but not down to zero.

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The “yes” in “yes, but” is important. You’re not rebutting so much as redirecting. Moving somebody from X opinion to Y opinion requires two steps. In step one, you validate that thinking X isn’t foolish – it’s common sense, many people believe it, you used to believe it yourself, whatever. In step two, you take them on a journey from X to Y. You’re not selling Y. You’re dropping breadcrumbs along the path from X to Y.

The Advanced Course

6. Cultivate an empathic attitude.

Empathy is an attitude. It’s not a strategy – it’s very tough to fake. It’s also not just a feeling. It can be cultivated: trying to understand how the situation looks from the other person’s perspective. It’s the trying that’s important. Being right matters less than being interested. The essence of empathy is wanting to know how things look to the other person.

What do you do when you can’t manage to respond empathically? Take a bathroom break. Count to ten. Privately tell a colleague what a jerk you think so-and-so is. Cross your fingers. Write angry emails you never send. And then try to feel your way back into the other person’s shoes.

7. Find a middle ground between obliviousness and intrusiveness.

Conventional advice on empathy stresses not being oblivious. Too often that advice results in telling other people how they feel (and how completely you understand why they feel that way). That’s presumptuous. It’s intrusive even if you’re right … and it provokes denial (again, even if you’re right).

The essence of empathic communication is finding the middle ground between obliviousness and intrusiveness. You don’t tell people how they feel, and you don’t tell them what their issues are.

8. Practice deflection.

Deflection is a specific, easy-to-learn, extremely useful technique for not being too intrusive. Instead of telling the other person how “you” must feel, the speaker deflects the message as much as necessary to make it acceptable. (The more sensitive the content, the more deflection is needed.)

There are five levels available, from undeflected to maximally deflected:

- Undeflected – you: “You seem to be really worried about X.”
- Deflected – I: “I faced a situation like this a few years ago and I was really worried about X.”
- More deflected – they: “Another client recently said that she was really worried about X.”
- Still more deflected – some people: “Some people in this position might be really worried about X.”
- Most deflected – it: “It could be tempting in a situation like this to worry about X.”

Deflection lets you get sensitive topics into the room but not quite onto the table.

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9. Express hopes, fears, regrets, wishes, and worries.

Expressions of hopes, fears, etc. are called “performatives” because they are both “claims” and “actions.” “I hope the situation will improve soon” doesn’t just claim as a matter of fact that if you looked inside my mind you would find hope. It expresses the hope. It performs hopefulness. The statement itself hopes. If you’re expressing your own hope, you’re powerfully establishing your authenticity, your humanness. If you’re expressing a hope that the other person shares – and may be reluctant to express – you’re showing empathy as well. Hopefulness is much more empathic than false confidence. Compare “I hope the situation will improve soon” with “I’m sure everything will turn out fine.”

Wishes are like hopes but less achievable (maybe too late to achieve). They are also wonderfully empathic performatives. “I wish I could give you a definite answer” is more empathic than “I simply cannot give you a definite answer.” “I wish the accident had never happened” is more empathic than “I know you wish the accident had never happened.” Regrets are unachievable wishes about the past, while fears and worries are the opposite of hopes: what we hope won’t happen. All are powerful tools of empathic communication.

10. Ride the ambivalence seesaw.

Whenever people are ambivalent, they gravitate to the side of their ambivalence that you are neglecting. (That’s why teenagers seem so oppositional; they’re ambivalent about most things.) If I’m torn between X and Y, then if you say X I’ll insist on Y; if you say Y I’ll retort with X.

Blame is a good example of the ambivalence seesaw. When people blame themselves, we tend to forgive them; when they forgive themselves or scapegoat someone else, we tend to blame them far more.

11. Acknowledge uncertainty.

Another common seesaw is uncertainty. Whatever the situation, as a rule much is known and fairly predictable, and much is unknown and unpredictable. If you focus on how confident you are that X is true, everyone else is likely get on the other side of the seesaw; we end up feeling less confident about X than we were to start with. The trick, then, is to make your points uncertainly (but with a confident tone) – which paradoxically bolsters other people’s confidence that you’re probably right.

Like all consultants, I experience the uncertainty seesaw almost daily. It doesn’t work to say to a client, “I’m one of the world’s leading experts in this field. Trust me.” That pushes the client to the other seat on the seesaw, the unconfident seat. I’m far better off when I say, “Look, this isn’t exactly a hard science. There’s a lot of art in my advice, and a lot of luck. You have to make your own best judgment.” That’s harder to make myself say – but when I say it, clients end up taking a lot more of my advice.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Empathy in Risk Communication (Jul 2007) -- www.psandman.com/col/empathy.htm
- Empathic Communication in High-Stress Situations (Jun 2010) -- www.psandman.com/col/empathy2

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