

9 tips to listen well and build empathy with coworkers

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 coworkers? And who might be excluded or feel unsupported when you don't make the effort to learn what they care about?

When you take just a few extra minutes to listen—really listen—and build empathy, you'll better understand people's experiences. You'll open your mind to their diverse perspectives. And your coworkers will feel more heard and respected.

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



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

Most everyone has room to connect in a more meaningful way with coworkers. 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 very well.

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 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 virtual coffee, or joining a newly formed committee or employee resource group. 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. Approach the questions with openness and curiosity—to know what's happening in their world and how they feel about it.

For example, let's say you see a peer in the break room or start a video call with them about an upcoming project:

You: “Hi, Mila, how are you doing?”

Mila: “It’s been a pretty stressful week—so much for getting enough sleep!”

Poor:

You: “Oh, that sounds rough. Good luck.”

Mila: “Yeah. Thanks.”

Better:

You: “It must be stressful if you’re losing sleep. 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. Close those other tabs. And give the conversation your full attention. Especially when you’re speaking with someone outside your usual circles, showing warmth and engagement can help the other person feel comfortable.

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 during difficult points.

How much eye contact is [too much](#)? That depends on your situation and cultural norms. If you feel like you’re starting to stare, periodically shift your gaze to the speaker’s hands or elsewhere as you process what you’re hearing.

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 complex or emotional subject.

When the other person pauses or stops talking, you may be tempted to jump in 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 them with a well-placed “*Mm-hmm*” or “*Tell me more*” to invite the other person to keep sharing.

For example, continuing the conversation above:

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 operations 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 asking another open-ended question (“*Oh, what makes you say that?*” or “*Could you say more about that?*”) or offering 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 their arms or looking down? Or are they 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 more openness.

For example, if the person has crossed their 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 their thoughts and gesturing, you might say:

“It sounds like you’re really excited about this. I’d like to hear more.”

6. After the other person has fully expressed their thought, paraphrase back what you’ve heard to ensure you understood correctly.

Paraphrasing—offering your 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 their 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 an issue in the same way, with nothing lost in translation.

Start with phrases like:

- “*It sounds like ...*”
- “*If I’m understanding right, you ...*”

- *“To make sure I understand, you’re saying that ...”*

And if appropriate, 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 you’re nervous about delivering it to the executives. Do I have that right?”

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 them or how you want to reply.

For example, if your peer says, *“I’ve worked hard on my presentation, but I’m worried the executive team won’t approve my request,”* you might respond:

Poor:

“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.”

Note: 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 perspectives and think they matter. This is especially important to convey if a coworker feels marginalized at work (for example, if they feel 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 all you need to do to help the 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 (*“How about presentations in the past where you’ve felt confident—what did you do to 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 or how to collaborate with them in the future. For example, you might gain respect for a coworker when you learn that they spend weekends volunteering. Or, if you learn that a peer has expertise and a willingness to help you with a relevant project, you might look for ways to invite them to contribute.

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 more positive interactions in the future. For example:

You: "Thanks for taking the time to talk. 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 interested to hear how it goes."

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