

Empathy at Work: Core Ideas for Teaching an Introduction to Empathy

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Key Points

1. What empathy is (and is not – sympathy, compassion, counselling, etc) – e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>
2. How much it matters – in organizations, in leaders (see Center for Creative Leadership study - Gentry et al., 2016)
3. How increased power tends to diminish empathy (see Sutton, 2009 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-XO4QC2UF0>)
4. Empathy as a skill that can be learned and practiced (e.g., <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joyce-marter-/empathy-b-4483494.html>; www.psychologytoday.com/blog/threat-management/201303/i-dont-feel-your-pain-overcoming-roadblocks-empathy)

Powerful Video

This 4 minute video beautifully captures how little we generally know about what others are feeling – and the power of gaining insight into it. I often open with this video because it makes a core point so well – although it does tend to make people cry a bit, so be prepared!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDDWvj_q-o8

Exercises and Discussion

It is very easy to get students/execs to engage with this topic. Ask anything about their experiences of empathy (or lack of empathy) from others, what gets in the way of their being able to have empathy for others, or how they tend to respond to a colleague who is upset about an incident at work – all of these questions open up much discussion, and can be used to show what empathy looks, sounds and feels like in contexts relevant to those in the classroom.

There is also a great opportunity to explore people or situations around which students/execs experience an empathy block, or even feel quite irritated by someone's feelings or way of behaving. A bit of gentle questioning can help participants gain insight into what is bothering them – often revealing that the issue is more about them (and their own history, rejected elements of themselves, etc) than the colleague with whom they feel they cannot empathize.

Timing

I have taught this introductory material in a rushed 15 minutes and for over an hour. It could easily take longer - there is always more to discuss and never enough time to do it justice!