

Volume 40

The Question (my question, this time)

"What is your big takeaway from our four days together?"

The Answer (from a leader)

"I learned that I need to lead with empathy in my conversations more frequently, and I'm committing to doing that by using more powerful questions."

A Perspective

Each year, I deliver a four-day training program to a group of emerging leaders. In a recent class, I had the above exchange with a leader and I can't stop thinking about it. She inspired me. She also reminded me of the power of empathy and how, too often, as leaders, we worry more about the work and not enough about the person.

I have coached dozens of leaders around a variety of topics. The direction that the coaching takes is informed by feedback those leaders have received from their people. Feedback that says, "My leader doesn't care me about a person" indicates a lack of empathy.

Your Action Plan

How can you show empathy as a leader, and how and when should you do it? Before we can answer those questions, here are a few realities about empathy to bear in mind:

1. Research shows that, in key relationships, empathy — defined in this context as focused time together where there is an equal exchange of listening and sharing — leads to healthier relationships. (Email me if you would like links to this research.)
2. Recent research also indicates that use of emojis in interpersonal communications inspires positive feelings in others (though I would stop short of suggesting that use of emojis equates to empathy).
3. Empathy is measured entirely by how others feel about your reactions, making it a difficult thing for a leader to measure.

Here are two simple steps to practicing empathy:

1. Put a reminder post-it on your phone or meeting agenda with a question to ask yourself: "What feeling(s) am I hearing?" and a resulting question to ask your people: "I feel like I am hearing [name the feeling] in your statement. Is that accurate?"
2. Make a goal to name a feeling or emotion you are hearing during each interaction.

For example, when I'm coaching on the phone, I can hear smiles when people are having a good day, so I will always say, "I feel like I hear a smile through the phone. Are you smiling?" (A side note: If someone comes with a bombshell — such as a death, divorce or major accident — simply say, "I'm so sorry," and let them share what they want.)

Recently, I was re-reading *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, by Parker Palmer, in which Palmer shares an experience he had with a friend during a time of severe depression. His friend would simply show up, say very few words, and rub Parker's feet. He writes, "Bill rarely spoke a word. When he did, he never gave advice but simply mirrored my condition. He would say, 'I can sense your struggle today,' or, 'It feels like you are getting stronger.'"

I wouldn't say I'm a naturally empathetic person. When I find myself in conversations where there are weighty feelings being shared, I ask myself, "How can I be present and just (metaphorically) rub their feet right now?" People-centered leaders bring empathy to their work with others, even if it entails creating habits to overcome their own emotional barriers at work.

As a first step in your journey toward greater empathy, I would encourage you to watch my two videos on the Johari window [[Lesson 1](#); [Lesson 2](#)] and think about



*For Committed
People-Centered
Leaders*

the one-on-one time you create and the questions you ask that create opportunities to show empathy.

Are you committed to people-centered leadership and improved interpersonal relationships with your people? To explore my proven process, contact me. Scott@thetrugroup.com

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