

EAO Supervisor Newsletter- December Edition

In this month's issue of the EAO Supervisor newsletter, we discuss the science behind empathy and ways to build a more empathetic workplace culture.

What is empathy?

Experts define empathy as the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.¹ More than simply connecting to a shared experience, empathy is "connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience".²

Empathy is a physiological process that happens in the body, as well as a feeling. When we see other people in action, cells in our brains called 'mirror neurons' fire. Mirror neurons send a signal to the brain and the body that simulates what we might feel if something we witness happens to ourselves. If you've ever yawned after seeing someone yawn nearby, or cringed when a character on a TV show did something embarrassing, you've experienced your mirror neurons in action.

Neuroscientists believe that mirror neurons play a large role in the development of empathy. Empathy mimics the ways our own brains would react under similar conditions, which means that empathizing with others can cause us to feel intense reactions in our minds and our bodies.³

Not everyone experiences empathy in the same way, and empathy is not a fixed quality. A person can practice empathy and reinforce the pathways in the brain that support empathetic responses. Over time, most people can increase their ability to empathize with others by taking others' perspectives into account and paying careful attention to the emotions experienced by the people around them.

How can I practice empathy?

It can sometimes feel awkward to practice empathy, but over time, practice allows us to grow our skills in empathy.

- **Sharpen your listening skills:** One of the most effective ways of becoming empathetic is to hear another person talk about their experiences. Listening helps you understand how other people think, feel, and live. Avoid interrupting your team members when they speak with you. Listen to understand, not just to respond. Don't multitask when other people speak with you, but instead focus on what they're saying with all your attention.
- **Rephrase and acknowledge what's being shared:** It's easy to feel misunderstood in a conversation, especially one where you're feeling vulnerable. One way to solve this problem is to rephrase the main points of what was said to you. Doing this can help you become a better listener, validate the person you're speaking with, and improve your ability to put words to your empathetic thoughts.

¹ <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/empathy/definition>>

² *Dare to Lead*, Brené Brown

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/parenting-neuroscience-perspective/202006/the-neuroscience-empathy>

- **Consider new perspectives.** Your perspective is very subjective. What would it look like to truly try to understand where someone else is coming from? Think about the different details, values, and experiences that may stand out to someone else. Don't assume that other people will necessarily experience or interpret the same event in the same way that you do. Something emotionally challenging for you can be neutral for someone else, and something that seems small to you can be a big deal to another person.
- **Strengthen your relationships.** It can be easier to identify with the emotions of others if you have a better understanding of who they are and what's important to them. Getting to know people on a deeper level can help you anticipate their reactions and understand how they might feel about something.

How does empathy show up in the workplace?

Research shows that empathy can make workplaces more effective by building trusts and strong collaborative relationships. A 2015 study of 15,000 managers found that empathetic leadership was the skill that correlated the most with positive workplace outcomes.⁴ Employees also strongly prefer working for organizations that have empathetic cultures, with over 80% of employees saying that it impacts their decisions on where they work.⁵

Empathy can impact:

- The relationships you build with your team
- The culture of trust in your workplace
- Employee perceptions of leadership

While practicing empathy at work is important, it is different from the empathy you experience in your personal life. It's possible to be empathetic or compassionate while still setting a boundary. Many people are taught that making connections with others and creating boundaries are opposites, but setting empathetic and professional boundaries allow employees to feel supported while still maintaining their privacy.

When you're called upon to exercise empathy at work, consider asking what your coworkers truly need:

- Do they need you to have **Awareness**? Sometimes, all that your coworker needs is to feel like they've been heard. If this is the case, you can thank them for making you aware of how they feel and provide emotional support but can hold off on taking action.
- Do they need you to share **Advice**? In some cases, empathy looks like sharing advice and guidance with someone in need. Keep in mind that not everyone is looking for advice in every situation. It's good practice to ask others if they'd like to hear your perspective, or if they'd rather that you support them emotionally or help them take a next step without weighing in.

⁴ <https://psychcentral.com/health/empathy-at-work-encouraging-leadership-to-create-empathy>

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2019/11/18/the-importance-of-cultivating-empathy-in-the-workplace/?sh=ccb0f867851a>>

- Do they need your help to take **Action**? As a manager, sometimes employees will come to you for help on taking an action step. If you can't help an employee take an action themselves, consider consulting with a campus resource like the Employee Assistance Office or Ombuds.

Empathy is a crucial skill for a compassionate and effective manager to have. You can practice empathy daily to deepen your emotional intelligence and connect on a human level with the people you work with. Remember that you can always consult with employee assistance if you need guidance in building an empathetic culture at work.

Mind-Body Wellness Webinar

LifeMatters and the Employee Assistance Office are offering a virtual webinar on mind-body wellness on **Tuesday, January 24, noon-12:45 p.m. via Zoom**. *Mind-Body Wellness* is an opportunity to decompress and slow down. This interactive webinar will lead participants through practical mindfulness exercises, including:

- Conscious breathing
- Gentle stretching
- Guided relaxation

This webinar is offered at no cost to all UW–Madison employees. [Register online](#) to receive the Zoom link.

LifeMatters Monthly Promotions and Resources

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This month's promotional content includes:

Calendars:

- 2023 LifeMatters Promotional Calendar
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- Write it Down
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