

# EMPATHIC LISTENING: EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS AS LEADERS

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*This article focuses on the need to listen to the narratives of others from a place of understanding. Empathy is vital for successful communication. When we approach a conversation with defensiveness, shame, criticizing, or advising, an opportunity to connect with someone and lead them to a higher place is lost. On the other hand, when we practice empathic listening, we can empower individuals to become leaders and encourage more harmonious and compassionate communication in interpersonal relationships. It is our responsibility as leaders to initiate these changes through listening with empathy.*

A few months ago, I experienced the outcome of a conversation that lacked empathy. I chose to open up to a loved one about something that was personal and painful for me to talk about. Unfortunately, this attempt backfired. I walked away from our conversation feeling judged, misunderstood, and alone. My relationship with this person now felt rocky and unnavigable; I didn't know how to approach future communication with them. I felt like this person showed no empathy toward me, but, consequently, I showed no empathy towards them. This experience taught me that regardless of how others respond in circumstances similar to this, especially as leaders, choosing to listen with empathy is something that lies within our power.

Learning to empathically listen to the stories people tell us is perhaps one of the greatest skills we can learn and apply as the leaders in today's world. Neglecting this necessary skill in our communication can lead to misunderstandings, escalated conflicts, and damaged interpersonal relationships in organizations, government systems, international relations,

etc. Humans crave connection; we want people to hear our stories and understand who we are and where we are coming from. For us to make this a reality, we have to learn to listen with empathy. Cultivating the ability to listen empathically to others can empower individuals as leaders in helping to promote and create a more compassionate society and world. Initiating this change is something that all of us—formal and informal leaders—can accomplish.

### **WHAT IS EMPATHY?**

When we hear the word empathy, we commonly confuse it with sympathy. Sympathy is feeling pity for someone, while empathy motivates us to act on that person's behalf. Instead of simply feeling bad for them, we want to understand where they are coming from and how we can help. We do this through listening to and feeling with them, experiencing and understanding them from their perspective ("Empathy," n.d.). A common metaphor used to differentiate sympathy from empathy is finding a person stuck in a hole. Sympathizing happens when we look down and feel sorry for them because they are stuck. Conversely, empathy is climbing down into the hole with them and saying "I'm here for you. I want to understand how you're feeling, so I'm here to experience it with you." This ability to demonstrate empathy, as described in the example above, is fifty percent inherited and fifty percent learned, according to empathy researcher and author Roman Krznaric (as cited in Manning-Schaffel, 2018).

These findings shed light on the fact that showing empathy is a choice; it is something we can learn how to do, and we can begin simply by getting in the habit of asking people how they are and actually listening to what they say (Manning-Schaffel, 2018). Can you imagine the difference listening this way would have had on the experience I shared earlier? This person and I may not have come away with the same opinions, but we would at least have understood and validated one another's perspectives. Similarly, as leaders, we may not agree with every opinion we hear, but being able to empathically take on the perspective of another is vital to relationship preservation and leadership success.

### **BARRIERS TO ACTIVE EMPATHIC LISTENING (AEL)**

A common problem with listening is that we tend to overemphasize the physical aspect of it; we assume that if we are hearing what they are saying

then we are being a good listener. In reality, listening is so much more than nodding our heads, not interrupting, and being a blank slate at whom they can throw their words (McClelland, 2017; Shrivastava, 2014). If basic listening is a difficult process, then it can be assumed that active empathic listening (AEL) is even harder. Knowing this, the necessity of education, especially for leaders, on common barriers to AEL is crucial. Having this knowledge will better prepare leaders and future leaders to recognize AEL barriers in their own lives and navigate a course to more empathic listening.

### *SPEAKING RATE VERSUS LISTENING RATE*

One logistical barrier to AEL is the fact that we process words much quicker than a speaker can speak them. A 1992 study found that the average speaking rate is 120–180 words per minute whereas the average listening capacity of the brain is 500–800 words per minute (Shrivastava, 2014). This gap naturally results in excess time for our brain to wander in the listening process. In a perfect world we would use this extra time to tap into empathy, perhaps by dialing in to what the speaker's nonverbal communication is telling us about how they are feeling. Instead, it often becomes a time where we get off track; we rehearse in our head how we will respond or become distracted by a memory their story reminds us of (Salem, 2003).

### *DEFENSIVENESS AND SHAME*

In conflict especially, defensiveness and shame are toxic habits that fuel the conflict cycle and directly halt the empathic process. While empathy draws us to another person and allows us to accept and understand their pain, defensiveness repels us from one another, undermining any hopes of connection. When we are focused on protecting ourselves and guarding our position, listening to and validating the other side of the story is most likely not the first item on our agenda (Beckenbach, Patrick, & Sells, 2010). Shame also prevents us from exploring the other's perspective. Note that there is a difference between shame and guilt. Guilt originates when we recognize we have caused another person distress through a particular action; we see how reparative acts, like apologizing, may restore our relationship with them. Guilt is linked to perspective taking (the goal of empathy) and motivates us to do so. Shame, on the other hand,

condemns the whole self, resulting in personal distress. Shame tells us that the affliction we have caused another person is not because of a particular action but because we ourselves are inherently bad. Why then would we want to hear the other's perspective and further recognize the problem that we believe we are? When shame envelops us, we don't listen with empathy; instead, we resort to more damaging behaviors such as ignoring the problem or the person, denying responsibility, or even lashing out at the very person who needs our empathy (Leith & Baumeister, 1998).

### *OTHER BARRIERS*

There are other barriers to empathy, including: criticizing, challenging the legitimacy of the speaker's feelings, giving advice, interrupting, and changing the subject (Salem, 2003). In the vulnerability of sharing one's story, perhaps the worst response one can receive is that of criticism. Critical phrases such as "Why did you do that?" can staunch the open flow of information sharing and may result in feelings of shame if the speaker feels that the listener is negatively judging their character and actions. Likewise, the speaker should not feel like the purpose of sharing their story is to convince the listener of the truthfulness of their feelings; they want to be trusted and validated. Furthermore, if we are interrupting, giving advice, or changing the subject, the listener may feel that we are there to listen minimally and then get our point across. These responses may communicate that we want to change them and how they do things instead of communicating understanding and support (Jones, Bodie, & Hughes, 2016; Serbin, 2013).

### **ENABLERS OF AEL**

Admittedly, we are all human, and because of this we give in to behaviors that hinder AEL. We get distracted, become defensive, shame ourselves or others, interrupt, criticize, and give advice even when we have good intentions in our listening. But, as leaders, we can do better than this. We can become agents of change in our lives and in the lives of others by learning how to overcome these barriers. The solutions to these barriers are contained within the AEL process, the steps of active listening with empathic habits woven throughout them. When acted upon, these are the habits that have the potential to transform communication, relationships, and leadership.

*ACTIVE LISTENING*

The active listening process is composed of three steps: sensing, processing, and responding. Sensing involves an active awareness of both the verbal and nonverbal, explicit and implicit information the speaker is communicating. Processing comprises synthesizing the information gained during the sensing stage into a narrative whole. The final step, responding, is the listener's way of letting the speaker know that they hear and understand what is being communicated. This is done through verbal and nonverbal cues such as nodding one's head, asking questions, and paraphrasing (Jones et al., 2016; Shrivastava, 2014). Together, the combination of sensing, processing, and responding contribute to the listener's efforts to communicate empathy to the speaker.

*MINDFULNESS IN THE SENSING STAGE*

In the active listening process, leaders can utilize the following empathic concepts to encourage a more compassionate flow of communication. David Sauvage, a corporation consultant, states that, "The basis of empathy is emotional self-awareness" (as cited in Manning-Schaffel, 2018). This means we have to sense and accept our own thoughts and emotions before we can do the same in our communication with others. In support of this claim, research shows that individuals who score high on mindfulness also score high on empathy and that vulnerable (empathic) listening is dependent on the listener's understanding of what is happening internally for them (Jones et al., 2016; McClelland, 2017).

In summary, if we are to accurately interpret and articulate someone's emotions back to them, we must first be able to internalize and comprehend our own emotions. Part of this emotional intelligence is being able to differentiate when we are feeling guilt versus shame. In leadership, identifying shameful thoughts is an important step in correcting our thinking. Rather than resorting to defensiveness or retreating from a situation (which are common side-effects of shame), we can instead engage in reparative acts (i.e. apologizing, listening to the other person's narrative) that produce empathic results in our relationships.

*SELF-EXPERIENTIAL EMPATHY AND IMAGINATIVE IMITATION IN THE PROCESSING STAGE*

During the processing stage of active listening, we may not initially identify with the narrative being told; this makes it harder to take on the speaker's perspective. In situations such as these, leaders may find the tactics of self-experiential empathy and imaginative imitation useful. Self-experiential empathy occurs when the listener reflects back on their own experiences to help them better comprehend the speaker's narrative. Imaginative imitation involves mentally putting oneself in another's shoes and imagining what a particular experience must have felt like for them (McLeod, 1999). When listening, good leaders will extend beyond trying to logically synthesize the details of a narrative, they will also try to feel how the speaker is feeling. Both self-experiential empathy and imaginative imitation can aid in this process.

*POSITIVE RESPONSE METHODS*

Sensing (being aware of the speaker's communication and one's own thoughts and feelings) in addition to processing (synthesizing the narrative and beginning to feel with the listener) are both vital steps in AEL. When done well, these first two steps have the potential to set the leader up for success in the response stage. However, to be a good empathic listener, one must be good at all three steps (McLeod, 1999). As previously stated, disbelieving someone's emotions, telling them how to feel, teaching, and giving advice are negative ways of responding that discourage the speaker from feeling empathy. A more favorable alternative is to check the accuracy of our processing by vocalizing how we think the individual is feeling and then listening to see if we need to readjust our perceptions. Open-ended questions and attentive nonverbal behaviors are also responses that inspire more empathy. Rather than being an interpreter trying to give meaning to the speaker's words, the listener is more like a mirror, reflecting back the emotions and perspective of the speaker to help them know they are understood (Salem, 2003). The difference between these two approaches, interpreter and mirror, may seem small, but the resulting consequences can be monumental.

## RESULTS OF AEL

Utilizing AEL skills allows leaders to positively impact individuals, relationships, and cultures by setting an example of valuing and validating narratives that may be different from our own. One way this happens is through the facilitation of reappraisals. A reappraisal occurs when a person sees an event or emotion in a more positive light. Jones, Bodie, and Hughes' (2016) research found that empathy and active listening directly predicted reappraisals, meaning that showing empathy as a listener can help the other individual become an agent in how they construct meaning from their emotions and experiences. This is leadership in action. McLeod (1999) discovered that the following therapeutic microprocesses are other possible results of empathic listening:

These include: feeling valued and accepted; feeling confirmed in one's own identity as an autonomous, valuable person; learning to accept feelings; reduction in alienation ("I am not abnormal, different and strange"); learning to trust and get in touch with one's own experiencing; cognitive restructuring of chaotic experiencing; and facilitating recall and organization of information. (p. 11)

Again, these are all benefits that simply result from someone being willing to listen, with empathy, to another individual's narrative. It is clear that empathy can greatly benefit the individual being listened to, but what would happen if both parties in a conversation applied empathy? How would this change relationships, communities, and the world? Shrivastava (2014) claims that empathic listening creates, maintains, and enhances positive interpersonal relationships. Salem (2003) lists four ways it does just that. First, it enables those in conflict to release their emotions in a healthy, constructive way. The second and third benefits outline that it reduces tension through encouraging the open sharing of information. Lastly, empathic listening helps create a psychologically safe space that is conducive to collaborative problem solving.

### *IMPACT ON LEADERSHIP*

Together, these factors have the potential to facilitate greater emotional intelligence, healthy relationships, and both negotiations and solutions that better serve both parties involved in conversation. As individual leaders, it is important that we begin implementing this impactful process

in our own lives through learning about, internalizing, and applying principles of empathic listening. Leaders who exercise AEL in their relationships have the potential to create a ripple effect in propelling society to a more compassionate destination.

In the beginning, I described a personal experience from my life that lacked empathy and therefore resulted in a damaged relationship with someone close to me. Just a few weeks ago, I had another encounter in my life that went quite differently. I was struggling to share the strong emotions I was feeling and the events that led up to them with a family member. None of this person's approaches in helping me to open up were working, in fact, they seemed to be making things worse. Finally, I blurted out, "Look, I need you to just listen to me. Don't jump in, don't give me solutions, just listen." It was a therapeutic process as I vocally explored my thoughts and feelings with my loved one and what I found was amazing. I calmed myself and found a more positive perspective because someone was there to listen to, believe, and feel with me. I felt understood, and because I felt understood, I wanted to understand them better. What made this experience so beautiful was that it transcended our relationship; I was so profoundly affected that I wanted to listen this way to the stories others tell me so that they could feel the way I did. This lesson has helped me realize that our willingness to experiment with and improve upon our empathic listening skills demonstrates true leadership as we strive to make the world a more compassionate place, one conversation at a time.



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