

Fact sheet 6

Disposition: Empathy



Leaders with an empathic disposition have the ability to “...understand and share another person's feelings and emotions – to see things from the perspective of another and understand another's point of view”.¹ Empathic leaders listen carefully and are sensitive to others expressed and unexpressed feelings.

There are four components to empathy:

1. Taking another’s perspective – to understand, through various forms of inquiry, how and why they experience the situation as they do.
2. Setting aside any pre-judgments about others’ feelings and actions, for such prejudgments prevent careful listening. The evidence of this listening is that the leader summarises what the other person has said, and the other person confirms the summary is accurate. Any subsequent critical evaluation should be done collaboratively once the other person trusts that the leader has understood what they are experiencing.
3. Recognising others’ expressed and unexpressed emotions.
4. Communicating the emotion that is seen in order to check the accuracy of the perception.² Excellent leaders are open-minded about the accuracy, so they carefully disclose their perceptions and check, rather than assume, they have correctly interpreted others’ emotional states.

Empathic educational leaders do not sacrifice their role-related responsibilities in the interest of being empathic. While their empathy enables them to learn more about, for example, how staff are experiencing aspects of their job, they may still need to follow their inquiries and checking with respectful critique of what has or has not been happening, and with collaborative planning of the next steps.

An empathic disposition complements interpersonal courage, for the more empathic the leader, the more they will be courageous in respectful rather than disrespectful ways. Excellent leaders care deeply about the lives, learning and wellbeing of their students.

Exploring together

Explore the scenarios below. Discuss together how empathy is represented in these scenarios. What would be the outcome if the disposition of was not activated?

A team leader responds to a team member crying

When a teacher and their direct leader are discussing recent student data, the teacher begins to cry. The leader, using an empathic disposition, names the emotion observed, “I can see this is really upsetting you”.

¹ Tomlinson, C. A., & Murphy, M. (2018). The empathetic school. *Educational Leadership*, 75(6), 22-27

² Tomlinson, C. A., & Murphy, M. (2018). The empathetic school. *Educational Leadership*, 75(6), 22-27, p.20

The leader then pauses until the teacher nods or indicates agreement and provides a choice about whether to continue the meeting now or later.

The team leader does not presume the meeting should be postponed or redirected. Instead, the leader checks how the teacher would like to proceed, through questions such as:

- > “What would you like to do now?”
- > “Do you want to finish this discussion now or schedule different time to continue?”

Practice reflection

1. Do you find that it is easier/harder to empathise with some groups of people than others? What makes it easier or more difficult for you to show empathy with some groups?
2. How do you balance being empathic with teachers who are having difficulty, while at the same time being firm about the need for improvement?
3. How do you encourage colleagues to set aside prejudgments and be more empathic with those who frustrate them?
4. How well do you recognise the emotions of others when in conversation? How do you perceive the spoken and unspoken needs of others?
5. Are there situations where you have demonstrated empathy to the detriment of progressing a difficult conversation or situation? What happened as a result?

Skill building

The purpose of this activity is to support you in developing a common understanding of empathy as a prerequisite to reflecting on your own empathy.

1. Draft your own definition of empathy and think about an example of when someone has demonstrated empathy.
2. Share your definition of empathy with your team members and create an agreed definition.
3. Discuss with team members the importance of being an empathic educational leader in working with staff and students.