



2008 Spring issue

Our article for this season:

Empathy

Stephen Schwartz wrote in the Colours of the Wind from the Pocahontas soundtrack:

*" . . . if you walk the footsteps of a stranger
you'll learn things you never knew you never knew"*

Or there is another version that says *"unless you live in the skin of the other person, you will never be able to fully understand that person."*

In coaching, we often use the term 'empathy' – we say to the person we are coaching that 'I empathise with you', rather than 'I understand you', but what do we really mean and do we mean what we say??

Is being empathetic means being kind? Being soft? Having pity? Being compassionate? Does it mean that when I say I empathise with you, it means I understand what you are going through??

Definitely not. As the second saying at the top indicates, unless we live in the skin of the other person, we can never really understand that person. To have empathy for the other person is clearly expressed in the first saying – that unless we walk in the footsteps of the person we will not be able to see things the way he sees it. But walking in the footsteps of the other person does not mean we fall in line with him or her. Neither does it mean we agree with him or her. The second line expresses it well – that we will learn things we were not aware of before. We start seeing things from the other person's perspective. In the end, we might still not agree with him or her – that is not the outcome to be achieved, because once we start seeing things through the eyes or lens of the other person, we start to have an awareness that 'hey there is another view out there that I have not thought of before.' When this happens, we start to re-look at our own view. 'I still do not agree with your view but I now can see where you are coming from', and from this we start to re-negotiate our stand.

From the other person's point of view, he or she begins to feel that all is not lost and that we are not on different camps after all, that he or she is being listened to and being allowed to speak. There is a sense of respect and trust creeping in. When this happens, the whole energy between the two parties starts to shift.

Empathy has helped us to communicate more effectively as we are more sensitive to the other party and respect their feelings. We have started to listen to them and to learn.

"The wisest mind has something yet to learn"

--George Santayana

Having said all that, saying that we empathise and not following up on it is an empty exercise. There is no point saying 'I empathise with you but let's do it this way which I think is the best way.' Having and demonstrating empathy means saying 'I empathise and respect your views. Let us see how we can combine both our views and come up with an alternative view.'

As leaders, it takes strength to admit that there are other views – which might even be better than your views. But if you do not empathise and listen to the other person, you will never know there is another view. 'You will never learn things you never knew you never knew.'

"It was much later that I realized Dad's secret. He gained respect by giving it. He talked and listened to the fourth-grade kids in Spring Valley who shined shoes the same way he talked and listened to a bishop or a college president. He was seriously interested in who you were and what you had to say."

--Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Respect

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