There’s a lot of emphasis on “emotional intelligence” these days, and empathy is an integral part of this. In my line of work we frequently talk about being empathetic and how that just makes things better for you, whether it’s at office or school or home. However, simply saying, “put yourself in others’ shoes”, is easier said than done.

What if the shoes don’t fit, or are in a style that you just don’t like?

Lucky for us, developing empathy is like any other skill, and something that we can get better at with practice. Here are some suggestions on how to do this:

**Pay attention:** This seems blindingly obvious but is quite hard to do in reality. Often, when we have difficult conversations with people, we might be preparing responses in our mind in anticipation of what the person is going to say, or get distracted by the consequences of the conversation. So in effect, we are “hearing” but not really “listening”.

The first step in demonstrating empathy is paying attention to what the person is saying, and picking up queues from their tone of voice, body language and non-verbal gestures. What is the choice of words they are using? Do they seem angry? Upset? Nervous?

It’s also important to give the speaker the sense that you are paying attention; so maintain eye contact and don’t look away to check your phone.

If you have personally experienced what the person is talking about, share your experience to give them the comfort of knowing that you understand their predicament. If someone is talking to you about a problem they are facing, spend some time gathering information first before jumping into providing solutions. Ask questions and commiserate with them (eg: “That must have been a difficult situation to be in, how are you feeling?”).

**Consider what you know about the situation and the person:** Someone might argue with you because they are going through a stressful time in their personal life and the stress is carrying over to their workplace; or they could have skipped lunch that day and are “hungry”; or maybe it’s a combination of both! Getting to know the people around you better will help you be more empathetic towards them.

**You don’t always have to “feel” empathetic:** You may not always feel an automatic emotional response when demonstrating empathy. “Cognitive empathy” is all about understanding the other person’s perspective.

So if you are talking to someone who annoys you, or are in the midst of a negotiation or argument, use cognitive empathy to navigate the conversation.

In this case, putting yourself in their shoes is not so much about treating them the way you would like to be treated, but treating them the way you think they would want to be treated.

**Know when to back off:** Sometimes people are not open to giving or receiving empathy. If your boss is yelling at you and the team, that may not be the best time to talk about how everyone is feeling at the moment. At these times, it is best to listen and let it slide.

**Help others demonstrate empathy towards you:** Sometimes people around you need cues to showing empathy too. By explaining how you feel, (eg: “when you do <insert action>, it makes me feel <insert emotion>”) you help them better understand the consequences of their actions.

So next time you have a conversation with someone, remember to try on their shoes!

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