



Empathic Questions

Empathy – the ability to truly understand another’s perspective – is an important part of being an effective and respected manager. Empathy is conveyed in our non-verbal behaviour, the questions we ask workers, and the statements we make. Asking respectful, open-ended questions can often help obtain information about a worker’s emotional reactions, providing a unique understanding of their experience when emotionally distressed. Individuals are much more likely to feel comfortable and supported in the workplace when they feel they are understood.

The table below contains examples of some workplace situations, and empathic responses that can be effective in those circumstances. Keep in mind that if a worker is emotionally distressed, it is important to respect their privacy by speaking with them discretely. And avoid making assumptions about what might be helpful: focus instead on asking the worker what you can do to help.

Worker’s Emotional State/ Situation	Empathic Response
A worker at his desk appears sad and withdrawn, although the reason is unclear.	<i>“You don’t seem yourself today. Would you like to chat, or do you think a break would be helpful?”</i>
A worker seems angry and upset during a meeting after you’ve given her some direction on how to approach a project.	<i>In a calm, concerned tone say, “You seem upset...would you like to chat about what I said in the meeting?”</i>
A worker seems frustrated and dissatisfied with the expectations you have expressed. He says, “Wow, I can’t do that. That’s ridiculous.” He shakes his head and clams up.	<i>“You seem frustrated with me...can you let me know why you think that’s ridiculous?” (i.e., use the words the worker uses)</i>
A worker appears upset and tearful after being criticized by you.	<i>“I can see that this feedback is hitting you hard. What can I do to help you build strengths in the areas I mentioned?”</i>
A worker in customer service was verbally abused by a customer. She is now working quietly without talking about the incident.	<i>“I see that you are working away there. I heard what happened and I wanted to check in to see how you’re doing.”</i>
A worker is sad and tearful after a family member was in a serious car accident.	<i>“I’m sorry to hear about the accident, it sounds awful. Please let me know if there is anything I can do.”</i>
A worker seems upset and anxious after her daughter was diagnosed with a serious illness.	<i>“I can only imagine how hard it must be to have to put on a brave face while at work. What can we do here at work that could help you?”</i>



Worker's Emotional State/ Situation	Empathic Response
A worker is going through a divorce and seems to be having a hard time coping.	<i>"I know how hard it is to stay productive at work while dealing with personal issues...Are there things that can be done here at work that would help you through this time?"</i>
A worker needs to go on sick leave for an emergency surgery. He seems to be in despair, and is tearful when talking to you.	<i>"I'm sorry about the health challenges you are having. I hope you have a full and speedy recovery so we can welcome you back sooner. What can we do in the meantime to help you along?"</i>
A worker seems overwhelmed by work as she tries to meet a big deadline. She has been working overtime every day.	<i>"We would hate to lose a hardworking staff member to burn-out. How are you taking care of yourself these days, and is there anything I can do to help?"</i>

As you can see, you can be empathic in any type of distress situation – even when the distress is related to you. It is important to keep your own emotions in check and to focus on what the worker might be feeling. When you are being empathic, it is about *the worker*, not you. Focus on identifying the worker's feelings, and imagine what it is like to be in their shoes. Then, communicate your sincere concern. Having a few empathic responses in mind (like the ones above) may help prevent you from being caught off guard and lost for words. This is especially important for emotionally charged situations, when you yourself might become affected emotionally.