



ALASDAIR CANT & ASSOCIATES

## Tea and Sympathy - is that enough?

Eve is a team manager, and furious with one of her staff. “After all I’ve done for her! I felt really sorry for her after her Dad died and gave her extra time off, sorted out her duty rota, got other staff to cover for her and so on. And she just throws it back in my face, having a go at me in the team meeting suggesting that I’m side-lining her and so on.” What has gone wrong here?

## Empathy

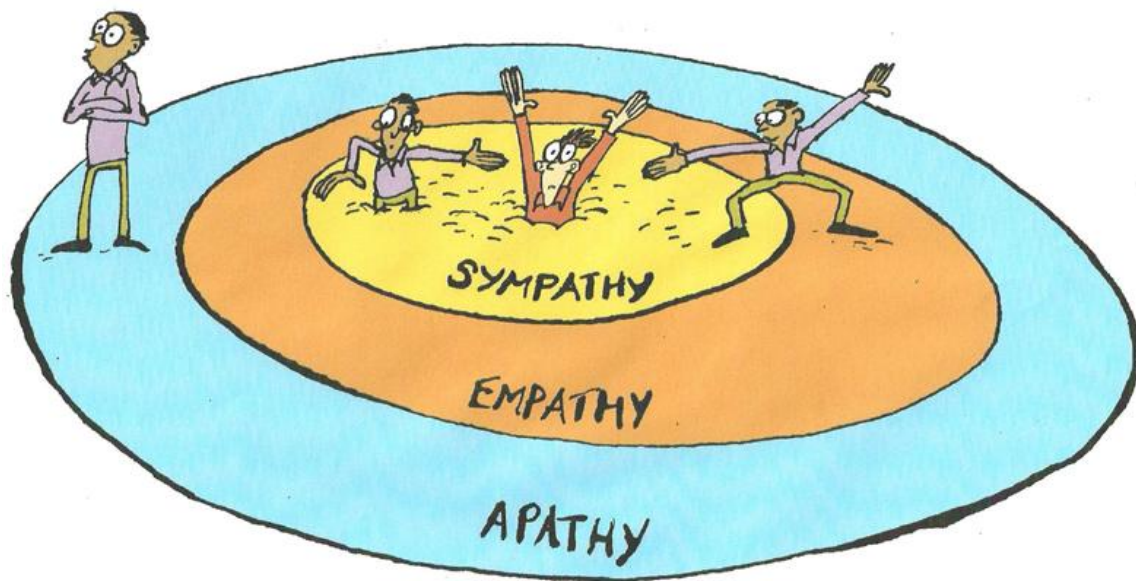
How do you define **empathy**, in one sentence? I often ask this of groups and individuals who dealing with difficult situations and relationships in the workplace. The answers vary of course, but in general the responses are along the lines of: “Understanding someone else’s situation/perspective” “Putting yourself in someone else’s shoes/place”. These answers are very revealing. I then might ask if they believe their colleagues or clients are unique. After some thought, the general feeling is of course, everybody is an individual, therefore unique. If so, everybody’s story or situation has to be at least slightly different. It is therefore impossible to understand someone else’s situation fully, and equally impossible to put ourselves in their position.

This can be a humbling position, especially for those with lots of experience who feel they know what someone else is going through by intuition. Equally, the person who has had a similar experience may make the mistake of not fully engaging with the situation in question because they are distracted by their

own interpretation. The result can be to seem patronising or uncaring. Have you ever had someone say to you “Oh I know just how you feel...” and you think to yourself ‘No you don’t!’ We can only *try* to understand the other perspective, *try* to put ourselves in their place. It is the attempt that is powerful and breaks through to new understanding.

## Sympathy

As described in the diagram, Eve has **sympathised** with her staff member and tries to ‘rescue’ her. So she wades in, trying to *fix* the situation. This is all done with the best of intentions, but it backfires because it isn’t necessarily what her colleague wants or needs. As we worked this through, it became apparent that Eve had immediately assumed the staff member would want the kind of support Eve herself had needed some years before. When we sympathise, we get caught up in the emotion, but professionally we may lose critical objectivity and effectiveness. Hence in the diagram we see the practitioner sinking in the metaphorical quick sand of the other person’s issues.



## Apathy

A further pitfall for Eve, is that because of this one negative experience it may affect the way she responds to similar situations in the future. Let's imagine six months later, a different member of staff describes something that has a similar theme. As it is being described, Eve goes to passive listening mode because she feels 'Here we go again.' She switches off from listening fully because she has already decided that she won't get involved. This may manifest in lots of different ways, but at the heart of it is **apathy**. Apathy usually manifests itself in the form of distracted listening. In honesty this happens to all of us some of the time, when someone's talking and for whatever reason we can't be bothered to hear fully what is being said. Perhaps it is because we've heard it so often before, or we disagree with what is being said. Instead of having the courage to be open about what is going on for us, too often we let it go, resulting in an often repeated cycle of poor communication.

## Working with the illustration

To conclude, the illustration has emerged as a workable metaphor to remind us that to work empathically is a real skill of balance. We need to show we are connected to what is being said without either getting sucked in or shutting down. Real empathy is apparent through body language and choice of words to convey true listening.

For example, if someone is distressed, the listener's body language should echo something of the talker's body language to show interest, even care. If body language is too motionless, in that context it is likely to communicate disinterest (apathy). On the other hand, too much mirroring can seem patronising or false. Words too can contribute or hinder. If the listener says "That's awful!" with feeling, that suggests sympathy because it is very

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subjective. The listener can say “That *sounds* awful!” with as much feeling, but the words subtly convey an appropriate distance or objectivity. This isn’t as easy as it sounds and takes practice as there isn’t a formula. Now, where’s that cup of tea?