

2.11 Listening With Empathy: Taking the Other Person's Perspective*

Donald W. McCormick

Most of the research and writing on communication covers what people *communicate*; but communication is two-way, so what we communicate—the information we *send*—only makes up part of the picture. How we *receive* that information and what we do with it makes up the rest. Two skills can dramatically help us to improve how we receive communication—empathy and perspective taking.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to experience the same feelings as someone else. It means identifying with that person, paying attention to that person's feelings and attending to how our own feelings resonate with theirs. This is the meaning of empathy in the more technical sense that social scientists use. Its meaning is looser in everyday use.

For example, many people confuse empathy with sympathy, or feeling sorry for another person's misfortune. Unlike sympathy, empathy can refer to fortunate happenings as well as misfortunes. When I share the excitement of my friend's fantastic new job, I am experiencing empathy.

Sometimes, empathic listening can be very enjoyable. I remember empathetically listening to a friend describe a very emotional situation. It was an emotional roller coaster ride to share his feelings as he talked about his frustrations, then his joys and his relief as he gained insight into the situation. I ended our conversation feeling closer to him. Empathy builds better relationships with others, whether the relationship is a romance or a friendship, is in a family, or at work or is in the community. Sharing others' emotions and *expressing this empathy* gives a person a

sense of being deeply understood. Unfortunately, most people rarely experience being listened to in this way.

It cannot only be pleasurable to listen with empathy, it is deeply satisfying when someone listens to us in this way. It feels great to realize that someone understands and shares our feelings. Empathy usually reduces alienation and isolation, resulting in a person feeling "valued, cared for, accepted as the person that he or she is."¹ Most of us want others to fully understand our feelings—especially people who mean a lot to us. This doesn't mean that they have to agree with us; it means that they must at least put aside their own concerns long enough to give us a heartfelt hearing.

Can people get better at empathy? Contrary to popular notions, empathic ability is not something one simply has or doesn't have. Many people believe they can't become more empathic, but with effort it can be learned. Three things in particular can help us become more open to another's emotions.

Robert Carkhuff describes one of these ways to become more open to another's emotions.² It consists of mentally asking, "How would I feel right now if I were (the other person)?" Suppose that I am in a T Group and another member—Esther—repeatedly criticizes me in a frustratingly vague way. I ask myself Carkhuff's "empathy question" and I imagine what she must be feeling as she tries to criticize someone in the unfamiliar setting of a T Group. I actually feel her nervousness. This changes my attitude towards her from irritation and frustration to one of empathy. And, our interactions are likely to improve quickly. The

* This chapter has benefited from the insights of Cheryl Armon, Marie-France Boisselle, Irene Jackson-Brown, Anita Hemphill McCormick, Susan Nero and Scott Schroeder.

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feelings empathy calls up in me are likely to make me want to help her articulate her complaint, and when she finally expresses it, I may even find that I agree with her. If I don't ask myself Carkhuff's question, then I won't find out what she really thinks or feels, and so may miss an opportunity to learn from some useful feedback.

Suspending judgment of someone else's feelings also helps us to become more empathic. We need to set aside evaluating whether it is right or wrong or good or bad to feel whatever the other person feels.³ This is essential, because we can still listen very carefully to others, but if we do it to find weaknesses in their arguments that we can challenge, we won't develop empathy. For example, when I listen judgmentally to Pablo, another person in my T Group, I am listening to him *in a sense*; but it resembles the way a prosecuting attorney listens to a defendant. To get out of that mode, when I become aware that I am evaluating the basis of his feelings, I try to let these judgments go. This makes it easier to allow his feelings to resonate within me, that is, for me to empathize.

Empathizing helps us better understand other people. Empathy helps us experience more of their emotions—more of their meanings. We only express part of what we communicate through words. Our facial expressions, voice tone and gestures communicate much of our meaning and most of our emotions. Paying closer attention to these things in other people will improve our skill at empathy. We do this by paying attention to the other person's feelings, paying attention to the emotions they arouse in us and putting off figuring out what we will say next. If we focus on articulating our own needs, thoughts, and feelings, we will miss much of what someone else is trying to get across.

Perspective Taking

Perspective taking is the ability to experience things as other persons experience them—to take their perspective. Perspective taking differs from empathy. Empathy emphasizes *emotion* whereas perspective taking emphasizes *thought*. Suppose that I hear that during a break in the T Group, someone praised a friend of mine—Carolyn. I think about what it must have been like for her to be praised in that way and then I feel pleased (as she probably did). Imagining what it was like for Carolyn was perspective taking, feeling pleased was empathy. As this example

illustrates, taking another person's perspective can often help us experience empathy. If we can see things from other persons' viewpoints, then we can often feel for them. Perspective taking requires mental stretching, just as empathy requires emotional stretching. Both are important aspects of listening.

However, perspective taking goes against some common attitudes. Many people take pride in failing to see another viewpoint. They characterize an opposing point of view as not only wrong but so faulty as to be incomprehensible. This attitude shows in expressions like, "I can't understand how someone could think that" or "I have never heard such a thing!"

Harvard Education Professor Robert Selman describes different levels of perspective taking.⁴ A very low level of perspective taking limits a person to a self-centered inability to take another person's viewpoint. People acting at this level are so egocentric that they see things entirely in terms of what they want, which doesn't exactly help them to interact with others.

Self-reflective perspective taking, the next level up, happens when the thoughts, feelings and wants of another person we are interacting with are considered. For example, if Jane is in a group with Fred, who is talking on and on about tangents, she will handle the situation more effectively if she can engage in self-reflective perspective taking and see how it looks from Fred's point of view. If she doesn't see things from Fred's framework she might snap at him and cause a conflict that she really didn't want to start. If, instead, she notices Fred is the youngest person in the group and seems to be nervously trying to impress others by telling them his uncle is the governor of South Dakota, she might instead interject reassuring comments into his monologue, to try to calm him down and avoid an unwanted conflict.

Third party perspective taking, the next level, includes the ability to step outside a two-person relationship and see it from the perspective of a third party in the group. For example, imagine that Jonathan and Wendy are in a group, and he becomes so irritated with Wendy that he considers raising his voice at her. It is one thing if he can see this from the self-reflective level and imagine Wendy's reaction. This self-reflective perspective taking helps, but the third party perspective allows Jonathan to imagine how a third party (like the rest of the group) would see his response to Wendy. At this level, he might ask himself, "How will the group understand or react to my irritation to Wendy?" or

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"Will the group think I am a loud jerk or will they be relieved that someone finally expressed the frustration they've all felt with her?" By adding the perspective of a third party, Jonathan can express his concerns while remaining aware of Wendy's. And he can also help keep his good relationship with the group (and avoid becoming the proverbial "loose cannon on deck"). Third party perspective taking helps us balance our own concerns with the concerns of the person we are communicating with and the concerns of the larger group we are part of.

Social system perspective taking, the highest level in Selman's theory, involves expanding our point of view beyond the people we see (or have seen) in a face-to-face group. It involves a larger, more abstract group—a social system. This could be an organization, community, nation or belief system. For example, suppose that in a T Group Mark makes a bigoted joke about a particular ethnic group. Phyllis does not take it personally ("Oh, Mark doesn't mean ill"). Mark isn't concerned and the other group members don't seem bothered. But Phyllis may feel that as part of society—as part of the larger social system—allowing such a comment to go unchallenged tacitly supports bigoted behavior. So Phyllis gently tells Mark that many people find this kind of joke demeaning and explains why. Phyllis responded that way because she saw the situation from the social system perspective.

Changing Behavior

So far, I have focused on *levels* of perspective taking ability, but how often we engage in it is equally important. It is one thing to *be able* to take another perspective; it is another to *realize* that it can be useful to do so. It is still another to *actually* do it or do it often. For example, I believe that perspective taking is generally a good idea, but I don't do it nearly as often as I'd like. As important as the question of how often we engage in perspective taking, is the question of whether we change our behavior as a result of what we have learned.⁵

We can improve perspective taking by regularly asking ourselves what our actions and what a situation looks like from the point of view of the other person, group or social system. "How will my true love see it when I ask for more time together?" "What will the group think when I make this comment?" Imagine how useful it would be to have a better understanding of how others see things. We communicate better when

we understand other people's mental frameworks.

Of course, the ability to take another person's point of view existed long before Robert Selman started calling it perspective taking. I like to think that this ability and its capacity to solve human problems inspired Robert Burns to write these lines in his 1786 poem, "To a Louse":

Oh wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as others see us!
I wad frae monie a blunder free us
An' foolish notion.

Better Listening

The combination of empathy and perspective taking makes for better, deeper listening. By working to thoroughly understand someone else in this way, we risk changing our mind or feelings. This kind of listening doesn't necessarily mean agreement. Trying on somebody else's feelings and viewpoints doesn't mean we have to keep them, although we may *choose* to adopt some of their point of view or emotions.

Perspective taking and empathy are great ways to understand others and learn from them. But, there is a tension between perspective taking and empathy and evaluation, as ways of knowing. School teaches us to think critically—to evaluate. But empathy and perspective taking are *also* very useful ways of knowing. Don't worry—engaging in empathy and perspective taking will not make us so open-minded that our brains fall out. We don't have to throw critical thinking out of our life. We just postpone it for a while. Empathic listening and perspective taking just ask that we first see how the other person feels and sees things. Engaging in critical thinking or engaging in empathy and perspective taking is not an either/or decision. *We can do both, as long as we don't try to do both at the same time.*

Perspective taking and empathy can be useful in a conflict. One study of community organizers found that they were more effective if they could sometimes empathize with the power figures they opposed. Of course, organizers cannot practice empathy and social perspective taking without also working to gain power.

Improving our ability at empathy and perspective taking is worth the effort. Our family life can become richer and more intimate when we can share more fully in the lives of our loved ones. We can become better

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parents when we can see the world through the eyes of our children. We can become a better friend when we practice empathy and perspective taking. Our work life can improve when we can see things from the perspectives of our customers, our employees or our employer. We can become better citizens when we can imagine how it feels to be in all sorts of different roles that make up our society and the world. The skills of empathy and perspective taking can help us get along

with people who are different from us—different in gender, social class, sexual orientation, race, culture or politics.

From Your Perspective

Taking your perspective for a moment, don't you wish other people better understood how things feel from your point of view?

Notes

1. C.R. Rogers. "Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being," in C. R. Rogers, *A Way of Being*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1980, p. 152.
2. R.R. Carkhuff. *The Art of Helping*, 7th ed. Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 1993.
3. Rogers, op. cit., pp. 137-163.
4. R.L. Selman. *The Growth of Interpersonal Understanding*. New York, NY: Academic Press, 1980.
5. J.H. Flavell. *Cognitive Development*, 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985.