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BUILDING EMPATHY

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Bested by her junior

Jillian was frustrated.

“I should be able to handle her better by now,” she grouched. “I’ve been dealing with Doris since my first day here and that’s almost ten years. And then I see this, this, I don’t know, this *kid* just ease her out of one of her moods. Whatever he’s drinking, I want some.”

I knew both players.

Doris, Jillian’s boss, was legendary in the company, her foibles well known. I’d met her numerous times over the years as I’d coached various people in the organization. I always experienced Doris as uncontained. Her calendar was uncontained. Her hair was uncontained. Her office space was uncontained. And her emotions were very uncontained. Hence her legend.

The “kid” Jillian referred to was Raul, who’d joined her group about a year earlier. I’d met him during an off-site I’d led. Although new to the team, he fit in comfortably. I’d found him observant and easy to connect with.

“What’s he doing that you don’t?” I asked.

“Dealing with Doris?” She paused, then said, “I can’t get her out of her moods. When she goes into one, we’re not going to get any work done. And I’ll be stuck listening to her for an hour. I swear, she started to go there this morning when Raul and I were with her, but he just eased her out of it. But I don’t know how he did it.”



Looking at me directly, she said, “I have worked my ass off over the years to keep her calm. I’ve been so damned sympathetic. I listen to her latest ideas. And I hear about this or that executive who’s out to get her. But I’ve never been able to do what Raul did.”

“And it’s not just because he’s young and male?”

Jillian laughed. Then, drippingly, “Trust me. Young *men* are not Doris’s blind spot.” Then, truly curious, she asked, “If it’s not that, what is it?”

Sympathy ≠ Empathy

“I wasn’t there so I don’t really know,” I said. “It might have to do with the difference between sympathy and empathy. But I don’t know what you meant when you said you were so sympathetic to her.”

“So *damned* sympathetic,” she reminded me with a smile. “When I’m in sympathy mode with Doris I just agree with her. ‘Really, Doris? That sounds dreadful, Doris. I am so, so sorry that happened, Doris.’ That’s sympathy, right?”

“Of a sort,” I smiled.

“Well, for me sympathy is better than empathy. I tried empathy and it nearly killed me.”

“How so?”

“When I was empathic and she’d be carrying on, I’d get all agitated. If she was angry, I’d get angry right along with her. Everything she was feeling, I was feeling, too. So shifting from empathy to sympathy was a big step for me.”

“Define empathy for me.”

“Feeling what the other person is feeling,” she answered.

“Ah! You and I define empathy differently,” I said.

“Really? What’s yours?”



“To me, empathy is being attuned to what the other person is feeling, but not feeling it yourself.”

“Attuned but not feeling? Are you splitting hairs?”

Attuned but separate

“I don’t think so,” I said. I thought a second. “There’s a leader I know named Randi. I see her interact a lot with her team. They come to her with their hair on fire, all enflamed about this issue or that issue. She recognizes how enflamed they are, but she doesn’t get enflamed herself. She’s *attuned* to their feelings but keeps hers separate from theirs.”

“So she’s noticing? That’s it? I just have to look across the table at a meeting and see Jacob is upset, and I’m being empathic?”

“More than someone who doesn’t see anything at all, yes,” I said.

“Oh, no one would miss it with Jacob!” she laughed. “But I know what you mean. I know those people. I always scratch my head and think, ‘Are you an idiot? Did you not see that guy was so uncomfortable? Could you not have laid off a little?’ I’m beginning to think some people are just blind to what others feel.”

“I agree,” I said. “It’s like a broadcast channel they’re not dialed in to.”

“Or maybe they’re dialed in but their signal sucks.”

“Because they aren’t *at-tuned*,” I laughed.

She groaned.

I went on. “Emotions are a language. Some people read it and speak it. Some don’t. That’s my experience.”

“And if someone doesn’t speak the language, they never will?”



Without judgment

“Quite the contrary,” I said. “Empathy can be learned. People can get better at it. They might not get as fluent as people who were born with it, but they can learn to read it. And to speak it.”

“What does the speaking part sound like? Obviously it’s not what I’ve been doing with Doris,” she said with a shrug and smile.

“Probably not,” I agreed. “That ‘so sorry, Doris’ business doesn’t sound very sincere.”

“Well, I do it better when I’m with her!” she protested.

“Even so, Jillian, you’re starting from a place of judgment.”

“Yeah!” she said with a little head shimmy and roll of her eyes. “She’s like crazy!”

“Understood. I’m just observing that if you’re judging her and her emotions, it can’t be empathy. Picture this,” I said. “One of your direct reports is talking about something that feels terribly important to her. And you’re thinking, ‘I’ve been there. I know exactly how she feels.’ Sounds like empathy so far, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I guess so.”

“Trust me. It does. But then it takes a turn. So it starts, ‘I know exactly how she feels.’ Then you think, ‘But she’s wrong. I’ve been there. She’s making a big deal about this and she’s wrong.’ All that judgment means you can’t really be attuned to what she’s feeling. You’re stuck in your position without giving hers any credit. So it’s not empathy.”

“So with this direct report, even though I don’t believe in whatever she’s talking about, I have to give a damn?”

Her directness cracked me up. “Yes. And if you can’t ‘give a damn,’ you at least have to be curious. You have to be interested in how she sees it.”

“But not feel it myself.”

“Right. Stay separate. Her feelings aren’t your feelings.”



Empathy's two parts

She looked past me to an imaginary point on the wall. She pointed her pen at it and said. "OK. There are two parts to empathy. Part one is reading emotions. Knowing people have them and knowing what they are."

I nodded, impressed, waiting for the second part.

"Part two is accepting that their life is different from mine. That whatever they're feeling is not what I'm feeling. I'm a different person so I have to have different feelings." She shifted her gaze to me and smiled. "This is the mother of a teenager talking. I am learning this lesson every day."

I laughed.

She asked. "Are you one of those people who walk around tuned into this other-people's-emotions channel all the time?"

"I think so," I said.

"And it's not exhausting?" she asked.

"Not for me. For me, it's my norm. I don't know anything different. To me, it's just data I receive without asking. Like noticing your height or your hair color; I notice what you're feeling. Or I notice that you *are* feeling."

"So if I wanted to get more fluent in this language, what would I do?"

Empathy tools

"Do you like to read?" I ask.

"Sure!" she said, turning to her screen.

"There's a book I use a lot. It's called *The EQ Edge*. It's easy to understand and has practical, helpful tools. One of the authors is named Book."

She pulled it up quickly. "Stein and Book." She hit a key. "OK. Ordered. What else?"



“Do you know Brené Brown?”

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“She has a [TED Talk](#) about vulnerability that is one the most watched of all time. I’m a huge fan of hers. On her [home page](#) is a little three-minute animation about sympathy versus empathy. It always touches me.”

At her screen, she asked, “Is it this little cartoon frame? With a bear and – whatever that other animal is?”

“A fox, I think,” I said. “Yes, that’s the [video](#).” And we watched it. We were both moved, Jillian for the first time, me predictably.

Then she asked, “Can you give me some homework”

Three empathy exercises

“Sure. I have three things you can try.”

“Fire away,” she said.

I said, “Start with the belief that there is a constant signal stream out there that, some of the time for you, is on mute. Your homework is to try to unmute it more often. So, after a meeting, don’t just focus on what happened. Ask yourself, what did I notice about people’s feelings? What was *that* person feeling? What about *that* one?”

“How will I know if I’m right?”

“Being right isn’t as important as trying to find the channel. Just gather more data. Notice feelings. That’s the homework for now.”

“Do I write it down?”

“You can, but don’t have to. You’re just trying to learn to read the emotions of others.”



“OK. Number two?” she asked.

“Before you go into a meeting, think about who’s going to be there. Then ask yourself how you think they’ll feel about the topics on the agenda.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea!” she said, lighting up. “I think I’d be pretty good at that, actually, but I’ve never thought to do it. I’m all over that one! Thanks!”

“The third one I tried myself and it was pretty humbling. Ask a friend to talk about something she cares about. Anything. Could be a movie. Could be her kids. After ten minutes or so, tell her what you think she’s feeling.”

“That was humbling?”

“It was,” I said. “When I tried it, I wasn’t completely tone deaf, but there were times when I was so off the mark that, yes, it was humbling.”

“Was this like a test you were taking?”

“No, my friend and I just agreed to do it with each other. Just to practice. Like going to the gym. Everyone needs to hone these skills. Even people like me.”

“So, I’d tell a friend, I’m going to listen to you for ten minutes then tell you what you’re feeling?”

“Pretty much.”

“This would be interesting to do with my teenager. She thinks I’m completely clueless. And maybe I am.”

Jillian took the homework seriously. She found she got better at reading the emotions of others but wasn’t always so good about reserving judgment. She also found that when she was able to withhold judgment, it gave her distance. She liked that. She felt all three homework exercises helped give her *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.™



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