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The Art of Empathetic Problem Solving

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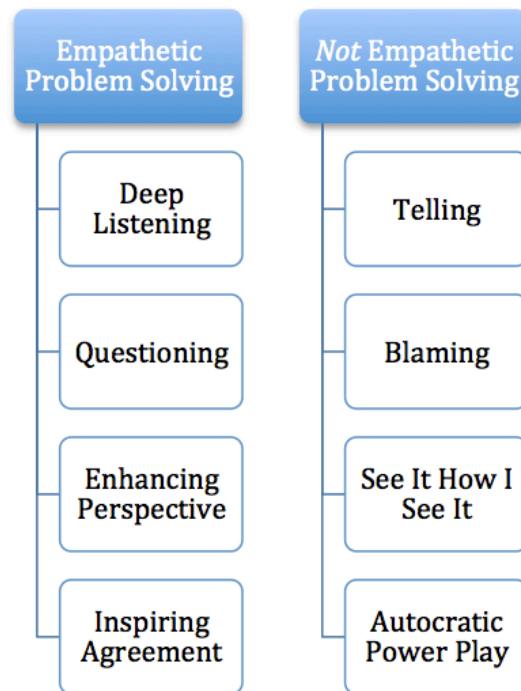
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As a leader, we are often called upon to problem solve with a customer or someone on our team. While most of us consider ourselves crack problem solvers, after all it is hard to get where we have without knowing how to solve problems, there is always more to learn and opportunities to do better. We all have individual leadership styles that work for us and yet, incorporating different ways of doing things that might not be our go to response can offer us a whole new set of tools to deal with the more difficult, charged situations.

Empathetic problem solving is the ability to really understand and feel another's perspective in a conflict or issue. Empathetic problem solving is about what you do in communication while solving a problem but also about [what you don't do](#).



What is deep listening? Deep listening is a way of listening where we are fully present without trying to immediately control or judge a situation. This can be hard for us leaders because we have so much responsibility and can be so accustomed to putting out fires. With deep listening, we do our best to stay in the moment and not jump ahead and define or solve the problem before we have more information. We also try to push away our preconceived notions about the situation or the people involved. For example, not letting our mind immediately go to fault finding when dealing with a problem employee. Or not assuming a customer that frequently complains is just blowing off steam. Rather we do our best to limit our assumptions and really tune in for precisely what someone is trying to tell us. Telling, on the other hand, is when we jump in and try to tell someone what happened before getting his or her perspective. When this happens, people tend to shut down and be resistant to solutions, even very good ones, because they don't feel they were really heard.

Questioning is about asking questions to understand what happened so that you can arrive at a workable solution. The other side of the coin is blame. Blame is about figuring out 'who did it.' Your questions should be as neutral and judgment free as possible. For example, it is better to ask, "What happened between you and Bob?" than "Why were you shouting at Bob?" This kind of neutral questioning can get the information rather than shutting someone down because they feel your judgment. Real questioning should be about revealing obstacles and uncovering alternate paths ahead. Again, this can be challenging because quite often we probably know what happened and we can bring our own feelings of anger, frustration and disappointment to these conflicts.

With enhanced perspective, the most effective leaders are able to help an individual embrace a more open perspective of the situation or conflict they are imbued in. Enhancing perspective is akin to 'see it how I see it' but more subtle and done together rather than delivered straightaway. When you enhance someone's perspective, you reframe the issue pointing out other perspectives and possibilities. You light the path and then allow someone to walk down it.

Inspiring someone to make the choice you want is always better than an autocratic power play. Whether its employees or children, gaining their agreement on what you want them to do always works better than making demands from up on high. While it may work with Nike, 'Just Do It' rarely works for long with people. Maybe they do something they don't want to do because they want to please you. Perhaps in seeing your fairness and lack of blame placing, they are inspired to be more conciliatory with a difficult colleague.

Even though this kind of engaged problem solving really requires stamina and mindfulness from a leader, it also can gain us the respect and trust our people. They see how we work to be fair, really listen, value problem solving over blame placing. And when issues arise, and they will, they will trust us, come to us and try to work through an issue rather than resort to a CYA or worse.

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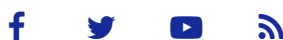
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