

# A Guide to Human-Centered Conversations at Work

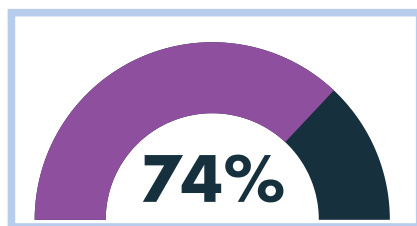
This guide is the first of a four-part series of guides focused on workplace communication. The first part, focused on empathy, will provide you with the tools to effectively engage your employees in one-on-one conversations, how to practice empathic listening, and five important questions to ask yourself to distinguish responding versus reacting to events in the workplace.

## Part I: Empathy

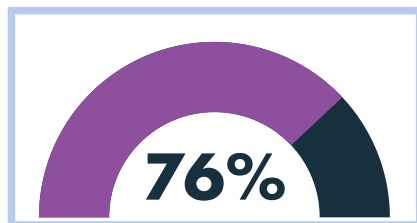
A recent study found that when managers can't effectively communicate with their employees or help them accomplish their career goals, workers [quit](#).

Commonly known as interpersonal skills, soft skills like building morale, conflict resolution, and maintaining relationships are key to a leader's success. A vital ingredient in successfully developing these soft skills is empathy. Now, more than ever candidates are seeking places that humanize the workplace experience:

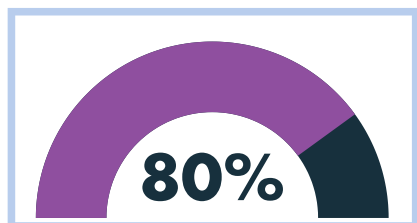
A 2020 survey of 1,950 employees, CEOs, and HR professionals found that:



of employees believe an empathetic organization inspires more motivated employees.



of those employees said they would work longer hours for an empathetic employer, and



said they would switch companies for equal pay if the employer were more empathetic.

(Business Solver, 2020)

\*Note: The words empathy and empathetic are used synonymously throughout this document.

# 1-on-1 Conversations

Whether you're an individual contributor or team leader, scheduling 1-on-1 conversations can help create meaningful connections, motivate employees, increase engagement, and leave folks feeling better equipped to do their jobs.

We get it, our work schedules are busy. However, setting time aside for these conversations has great benefits:



- **Helps leaders develop coaching skills**
- **Builds trust between employees and managers**
- **Improves employee productivity performance (up to 3x)**
- **Connects employees to a company's purpose and mission**

## BetterUp

BetterUp provides a great [template](#) for guiding these conversations focusing on 6 tenets: *well-being, progress, goals, challenges, gratitude, and company pulse check.*



### Well-being

Starting the meeting off by asking an employee how they are feeling sets the tone that you are invested in their well-being.

### Progress

Helps folks stay up to date on projects, as well as a space to align on what to prioritize versus putting on the backburner.

### Goals

Discuss the connection between their goals and career aspirations and how you can best help support them on their journey.



## Challenges

Particularly important for those of us who have a harder time asking for help. Actively inquiring about challenges they're facing in and out of the workplace will help you understand the obstacles to their success.

## Gratitude

Counting and acknowledging the wins is just as important as the challenges. Increasing our awareness of our achievements helps fuel our work.

## Company Pulse Check

Your employees are your best insight into how engaged they are, how they connect to the company, and the mission, vision, values.

### Additional things to keep in mind:

- **Mindset**
  - Come prepared to have a dialogue, to actively listen to the employee, and set the intention of the meeting as one to support them.
- **Recurring**
  - One-on-one meetings have a bigger impact if there is a demonstration of commitment.
  - Scheduling bi-weekly meetings lets the employee know this investment is not a one-time thing.
- **Flexibility**
  - While you may come into the meeting with an agenda, allow space for it to be collaborative such as prompting the employee to share anything else they would like to discuss.



Founded in 2013, [BetterUp](#) is the inventor of virtual professional coaching, and the global leader in 1:1 and group coaching, counseling, and mentorship at scale. BetterUp combines world-class coaching with AI technology and behavioral science to deliver personalized behavior change and improve the well-being, adaptability, and effectiveness of the workforce.

Employees who have regular 1-on-1s with their managers are **3x** more likely to be engaged ([Gallup, 2014](#)).

# Empathic Listening

Empathic listening is a technique of inquiry and listening that aims to understand the emotions and rationale behind a person's behavior or actions. Part of understanding folks is acknowledging that our unique experiences shape the way we view the world and how we react to situations.

When you practice empathic listening, employees will feel that you care about them and take their problems and well-being seriously. This will lower defenses, invite collaboration, and motivate parties to think of possible solutions together.



## 7 TIPS FOR EMPATHIC LISTENING

1.

### Be Nonjudgmental

It's hard for many of us to let go of our own opinions yet acknowledging a person's emotions and feelings without judgment will help the person lower their guard and invite them to share candidly.

2.

### Undivided Attention

In conversation, it is best to speak without computers or phones between you and the person. Giving someone your undivided attention will make them feel respected and help them remain calm.

3.

### Attentively Listen

This may seem obvious, but attentively listening to someone includes noticing the tone of their voice, body language, and other cues beyond just their words.

4.

### Nonverbal Cues

Be aware of your own body language in the conversation such as eye contact, nodding, and an open body posture.

5.

### Embrace the Silence

Sometimes awkward silences prompt us to speak up to fill the void. However, folks might need some time to gather their thoughts, what they would like to say next, or compose themselves.

6.

### Rephrase

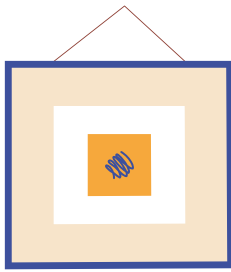
Rephrasing the person's words into your own will let the person know that you are seeking to understand and absorb what they are sharing beyond regurgitating what they said. Be sure to ask for confirmation that you are correctly rephrasing them.

7.

### Follow Up

Following up after a conversation is key in letting the person know that you are invested in their well-being and will motivate them to openly share with you in the future.

## Benefits of Empathic Listening



- Creates Trust
- Improves Problem Solving
- Better Decision-Making
- Increases Team Coherence
- Boosts Employee Well-Being
- Increases Productivity
- Improves Customer Service
- Defuses Conflict Situations



Source: [ParetoLabs](#)

When people reported their leaders were empathetic, they were more likely to report they were able to be innovative—61% of employees compared to only **13%** of employees with less empathetic leaders ([Forbes, 2021](#)).

## Practicing the Pause

The last section of this guide focuses on five vital questions you can ask yourself before responding to an employee. As we have discussed, our lived experiences and views of the world shape the way we show up and respond to situations.

Taking a moment to pause and reflect before replying, can help you communicate your thoughts in a way that increases the possibility of the person absorbing them.



## 5 Questions To Ask Yourself As You Pause

### 1. Does it need to be said?

Does what you're about to say really need to be said?  
How is it contributing to keeping communication open?

### 2. Does it need to be said right now?

Is this the best moment to say this? Are you reading the room to check if so?

### 3. Does it need to be said by me?

Are you allowing space for the person to share this themselves? Are you the appropriate person to bring this up?

### 4. Can I say it with compassion, care, and respect?

Are you conscious of your emotions and feelings? Will those emotions allow you to share what you're about to say in a way that will be well received by the other person?

### 5. Can I say it in a way the other person can hear it?

Are you conscious of the emotions and feelings of the other individual? Are they in space to really hear what you're about to say and absorb it?



We are living in a time of social change, a pandemic, and economic strain on families, to name a few of our current challenges.

Employees more than ever want to feel seen beyond being a number by their employers. They are willing to change jobs, roles, and even take a reduction in salary:

- **83% of Gen Z employees would choose an employer with a strong culture of empathy over an employer offering a slightly higher salary.**
- **79% would choose an empathetic employer even if it meant changing their role, industry or career path. (Business Solver, 2020)**



Empathy has become a key leadership skill that candidates and employees alike expect from companies. Engaging them in private conversations, coming from a place of empathy, and becoming aware of your own response or reaction to challenges will help you become the leader that people truly look up to and feel secure in your commitment to their humanity at work!

# Resources

## Videos

[Brené Brown on Empathy](#) by RSA

[Empathy: The Heart of Difficult Conversations](#) by Michelle Stowe

[One on One Meetings With Your Manager & Direct Reports - Tips & Tricks](#) by Productivity Ace

[6 Tips for Productive 1:1 Meetings with Your Manager](#) by Jeff Su

[Wheel of Mindfulness](#) by Future Work Designs

[How to Respond Rather Than React](#) by The Holistic Psychologist

## Articles

[Empathic Listening: Going Beyond Active Listening](#) by MindTools

[How to Implement Empathic Listening to Engage your Team](#) by ParetoLabs

[5 Simple Tips for Having a Successful One on One Conversation](#) by Quantum

[The Empathetic Leadership Advantage](#) by Forbes

## Podcasts

[Tarana Burke on Being Heard and Seen by Unlocking Us](#) with Brene Brown

[You 2.0: The Empathy Gym](#) by NPR's Hidden Brain

[Empathy, Compassion, Work](#) by Culture Amp

