

The #1 Skill Underpinning Successful Relationships

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What do studies of successful people consistently find to be at the root of their success? Intelligence? No. Creativity? No. Efficiency? No. Finance or other domain skills? No. While these and many other capabilities are important, they pale in comparison to people skills. People with the best interpersonal skills are the most consistently successful in life. People who are able to build relationships, work collaboratively with others, and gain buy-in for new ideas find the highest levels of success. People-oriented people are the most enjoyable to be around. They are the best communicators. They attract the best friends, recruit the most talented employees, build the highest performing teams, and create the happiest families.

Interpersonal skills have many names such as emotional intelligence, social intelligence, team orientation, compassion, diplomacy, and unselfishness. In general, these terms refer to an ability to relate to people. Relating to people in mind, deed, and word is at the core of having people skills. It is the foundation of building and maintaining healthy relationships. In more specific terms, the ability to relate to people is called *empathy*. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes. It is the ability to take the focus off of yourself and relate to what others are thinking and feeling.

Through a combination of nature and nurture people have varying degrees of empathy. Some have a great deal of empathy. They seem to have a natural gift of understanding, relating to, and caring about people. Others don't show empathy so easily. They tend to be more task than people orientated. They use logic more than feelings. Their to-do list is more about taking care of things than people. While they are often great domain experts and problem solvers they are not so good at working with people.

Fortunately, empathy is a learnable skill. It is not limited to those with a genetic predisposition to being kind and caring. While psychological studies find that some attributes of empathy have a degree of heritability, some attributes don't. Even those attributes that are influenced by genetics are shapeable. Therefore, with the right nurturing and environmental influences, children can be raised to be empathetic. Adults too can learn to be empathetic with the right training, coaching, and counseling. Regardless of age, provided that people acquire the proper knowledge and put it into practice, people can develop empathy.

Empathy has three components:

- **Understanding** – being able to accurately read people. Understanding people's perspective. Recognizing their needs, desires, concerns, fears, emotions, and thoughts.
- **Respecting** – valuing people's perspectives. Appreciating how people might have developed a thought, feeling, need, desire, fear, or concern.
- **Caring** – having concern for people's thoughts and feelings. Showing an interest in people's well-being, happiness, health, comfort, or whatever end-result they're seeking.

To the extent that you understand, respect, and care about the people you interact with, whether personally or professionally, you are empathetic. You are relating to people. You are putting yourself in others' shoes. You possess the #1 skill underpinning successful relationships.



The #1 Skill Underpinning Successful Relationships

To develop empathy or reinforce the empathy you have, follow these five basic principles:

1. Intercept any tendency you have to react to someone's comments with your own opinion. Don't react by offering your advice or worse, telling someone what to do. When in conflict, resist the temptation to defend yourself, shut down, or go on the counter-attack.
2. Replace any tendency to provide your own perspective with a desire to understand others' perspectives. As Steven Covey said in his best-selling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, "seek first to understand, then to be understood."
3. Listen, paraphrase, explore, and discuss others' perspectives before sharing your own. Listen with the intent to truly understand others' thoughts and feelings. Don't think about how you want to respond. Just listen, probe, clarify, and understand.
4. After understanding, let others know you respect and appreciate their thoughts. That you care about how they feel. Say something like "I can understand how mad that must have made you feel" or "I can understand why you would come to that conclusion."
5. After showing understanding, respectfulness, and caring, consider that your role in the conversation is over. In many conversations, particularly when people are hurting, upset, or afraid, they only want a comforting ear. They only need someone to listen. They don't want your opinion, advice, or help. When this is the case, showing understanding, respect, and care is all you do. You are done. Only when you are in a conversation where offering your perspective is helpful or appropriate, should you offer it. And only offer it after the other person feels heard and valued.

Two final points about empathy that most people don't understand. First, there is a misconception that people always have empathy or they don't. The reality is that empathy is context dependent. People who are normally empathetic are not so empathetic when under attack. When in conflict all but the most self-controlled and empathetic of people struggle to resist the temptation to be defensive, shut down, or go on the counter-attack.

Second, there is a fine line between showing empathy and validating people's thinking. Empathy is understanding, respecting, and caring about people's thinking, not validating it. When people are distressed about a job, for example, it may be tempting to validate that they are in a bad job, but by objective standards they may be in a great job. Their issue may be more about them than their job. The same applies to people complaining about a relationship, talking about their health, or promoting a new business idea. You can be empathetic without validating that their view of their relationship, health, or new business idea is correct. In reality, they may need to adjust their thinking. They may benefit from joining a gym more than having a medical procedure. They may need to adjust their business idea for it to be a successful one. They may need to address their own shortcomings in a relationship instead of blaming someone else. Unknowingly, many friends, family members, pastors, counselors, doctors, coaches, and co-workers have validated people's thinking which has had the exact opposite effect they intended. They caused more harm than good.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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