

Harvard Psychiatrist Identifies 7 Skills to Help You Get Along With Anybody

Empathy research reveals that truly successful leaders "shine" in interpersonal relationships.

By

- Carmine Gallo, Author and Keynote Speaker

Empathy is the ability to [understand how another person feels](#). According to new Harvard research in [The Empathy Effect](#), it's a trait that can be taught and developed. Build empathy and you'll be a more effective entrepreneur and leader.

Author Helen Riess is a Harvard psychiatrist who has developed empathy training based on her research in [neurobiology](#). Although her studies are done on [health care](#) professionals, the empathy traits she's identified can be used to make stronger connections between you and your employees, customers, or peers in any field.

Here are the seven skills you need to develop E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.

E — Eye contact

In Western societies we say that "the eyes are the window to the soul." Many cultures have a version of the same phrase. "Making eye contact is among the very first human experiences," writes Riess.

Riess recommends that you hold meetings face-to-face as much as possible. It'll help you pick up on nonverbal nuances that a person's voice doesn't convey. Also, when meeting people for the first time, maintain eye contact until you notice a person's eye color. "That extra beat telegraphs the notion that you truly see them."

M — Muscles for facial expression





Our brains are wired to automatically mimic facial expressions. When someone smiles at you, you almost always smile back. It's an automatic response. But you're also wired to tell the difference between a fake smile — just turning up the lips — and the “Duchenne smile,” a genuine smile of happiness. Muscles in the face rarely lie. Pay attention.

P — Posture

Sit up tall. It suggests “happiness or confidence.” As a doctor, Riess conveys respect and authority by sitting down with patients, turning her body toward them, leaning forward, and sitting at eye level.

A — Affect

Affect is the scientific term for emotion. Pay attention to a person's emotional state — is she sad, irritated, confused, or elated? There's little chance of communicating effectively if you don't understand where someone is at emotionally. Once again, millions of years of development have wired our brains to be remarkably accurate at assessing emotions. Trust your gut — it really does know something your brain doesn't.

T — Tone of voice

I learned a new word in Riess's book: “prosody.” Linguists use “prosody” to refer to your vocal pace, rhythm, and pitch. According to Riess, prosody “infuses a layer of emotion to the spoken word that goes above and beyond the singular meaning of each word.” That is, *how* you say something telegraphs a wealth of content.

In medicine, Riess is teaching health care providers to match the volume and pace as if they were having a conversation with a friend during a difficult time. Soothing tones result in better patient conversations and outcomes.

H — Hearing the whole person



“Empathetic listening means paying attention to another person, identifying her emotions, and responding with compassion and without judgment,” writes Riess. For example, don’t speak when you’re in the “red zone.” When emotions are running high in an argument, take a step back. Don’t interrupt. Don’t match the other person’s emotion by raising yours to the red zone. You’ll find that the conversation will de-escalate quickly if you follow these rules.

Y — Your response

Emotions are contagious. You might not realize that your emotional state is rubbing off on others. “Through shared neural networks, your feelings about others may transmit very important information about how they are experiencing what you say and do,” according to Riess. If you’re angry or unsure of yourself, or fearful, those emotions will leave an impression on others and impact the quality of your communication. Pay attention to how you feel because it’s a signal of how people around you will feel.

The actor [Alan Alda](#), who played one of the most empathetic characters in television history — *M.A.S.H.*’s Hawkeye Pierce — wrote the forward to *The Empathy Effect*. Alda says he’s been on a quest to improve communication. After he met Riess, Alda says he realized what he was really searching for was empathy. His big takeaway — empathy can be taught. Empathy, Alda says, is the “fundamental thing that helps us to thrive.”

Empathy might be your ticket to connection and, ultimately, success.

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Carmine Gallo, **Author and Keynot**

