

How To Connect With The Feelings Of Others

Is there a taboo on talking about feelings at your place of work? Is there a tacit collusion to pretend that none of us are as sentient as in fact we are? What kind of depth happens in the conversations you initiate or the teams you lead?

Shallow work environments are getting left behind in the race to attract the best talent. Dead from the neck down doesn't cut it anymore.

I was talking with a group of CEOs and senior executives last week about releasing the blocked energy in their most challenging people. I was outlining mentoring tools with which they can help their colleagues develop self-confidence, handle conflict, navigate fears and connect with the feelings of others.

As I went into the last segment—connecting with what another feels—the room went quiet. “We can't talk like this at our workplace” was the refrain.

In our culture, we act as if business is divorced from feeling. Yet, when you ask a group of people to name the most successful leaders they know, every example is someone who knows how to connect with the feelings of the people around them.

Some leading companies are deliberately creating work to be a place where a greater depth of feeling is welcome.

Here are five practices for developing your capacity to create an atmosphere in which it is safe for people to bring forward their inner depth:

1. **Nothing Else Matters.** For at least a few moments each day, deliberately focus all your attention on what is right in front of you. It could be the person you are engaging in a conversation or simply staring at a group of ants or a tree. Send everything else, including thought and concern about yourself, to the background.
2. **Level with a Kid.** Find some time to talk straight with a pre-teen. Set aside parental mode or trying to be as nice as Mary Poppins. Listen for what is on his or her mind and heart and, in a way that connects with where they are, share what is important to you.
3. **Interpret All Behavior as a Way of Loving.** We usually interpret the behavior of others for its impact on us and the projects or people we care about. Re-frame what you see the people around you doing. Limit yourself to only two possible explanations for everything you see: it is either an expression of love or a cry for love.
4. **Notice Your Own Body.** When someone walks into the room or a meeting closes in on a core issue, what happens inside your own body? Notice the subtle changes: tension in your hands, openness or gathering of energy in your belly, a flutter in the chest or eyelid. As we become more aware of the feelings moving in our own bodies, we instantly connect more readily with what is moving in others.
5. **Acknowledge Personal Events.** Things happen for people that have no direct relationship to our work with them. They have birthdays, a new tattoo or haircut, a spouse gets sick, their sports team wins a big game. Some are obvious, some not so. For those you work with most closely, write down 10 personal events that have happened for each of them in the last week. Noticing more of more of these will lead you to that timely acknowledgment that just wins a person's heart.

Even in the most traditional environments, there are so many ways to connect with what others are feeling. Depth breeds talent. I continue to benefit from simple practices like the five outlined here. You might be surprised what paying attention in this way will do for you.

About the Author

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