THE COMPLETE LEADER

COACHING GUIDE

EMPATHY

The ability to be “in the feeling of the other,” recognizing their emotions and seeing their experience as they see it.

LEADERS LEAD OTHERS

One of the 25 leadership competencies

SECTION 01

WHY EMPATHY MATTERS

Empathy is one of the 25 core competencies that define a complete leader. As you grow this capability, you'll notice real shifts in how you lead yourself and influence others.

This guide is built for a 90-day journey. You'll explore the foundations, assess where you stand today, practice new behaviors, sidestep common traps, and track your progress, at your own pace or alongside a coach.

WHAT STRONG EMPATHY LOOKS LIKE

- You meet and exceed expectations because you understand what people actually need
- You build an environment of trust where people feel heard and understood
- You earn a reputation for being attentive and fair in your dealings with others

> **REFLECT**
>
> *Why does Empathy matter to you personally? How might developing it change your effectiveness as a leader?*

SECTION 02

FOUNDATIONS OF EMPATHY

THE DEFINITION

The ability to be “in the feeling of the other,” recognizing their emotions and seeing their experience as they see it.

Like any skill worth mastering, Empathy rests on a few core building blocks. Understanding them gives you a vocabulary for your own growth.

THE CORE ELEMENTS

1 **Listening to understand**

Going beyond the words to hear the underlying emotions and needs. Paraphrasing what you hear confirms you understood it, and shows the other person they matter.

2 **Building relationships**

Investing time to learn about people, their motivators, and their lives. Empathy grows from genuine, ongoing connection, not one-off conversations.

3 **Advocating for others**

Acting on what you understand: championing people’s interests, needs, and concerns, sometimes taking a personal or professional risk for their sake.

REFLECT

Which element feels most familiar? Which one feels like a stretch right now?

SECTION 03

YOUR STARTING POINT

Before you move forward, take an honest look at where you are today. Read each statement and mark how often it's true of your leadership.

I consistently listen to understand others and their underlying emotions.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I find it easy to set aside my assumptions so I can understand people at deeper levels.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

When listening, I repeat back the facts and reflect the feelings I hear to verify what's being communicated.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

My conversations are a balance of asking meaningful questions and stating my own thoughts.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I know what motivates the people I work with most closely, and what they are working through right now.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I speak up for other people's needs and concerns, even when it costs me something.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

REFLECT

Looking at your answers, where is your greatest opportunity for growth? What patterns do you notice?

SECTION 04

EMPATHY IN PRACTICE

Competencies grow through deliberate practice. Work through the activities below in order, or choose the ones most relevant to your context.

ACTIVITY 01 10 min

The Open-Ended Question

Open-ended questions invite people to expand and signal that you genuinely want to hear them. Practice daily for a week.

TRY IT

1. Make it a goal to use at least one open-ended question in every conversation tomorrow.
2. Try prompts like “Tell me about…” or “What makes you say that?”
3. Record what you learned that you would otherwise have missed.

ACTIVITY 02 15 min

Lean Into Disagreement

A disagreement is an opportunity to understand someone’s perspective more deeply.

TRY IT

1. The next time someone disagrees with you, treat it as a chance to learn.
2. Ask “Why do you feel that way?” or “Tell me more about your position.”
3. Note how the conversation deepened your understanding of that person.

ACTIVITY 03 10 min

Paraphrase to Confirm

Briefly restating what someone told you proves you were listening, and catches misunderstandings early. Practice daily for a week.

TRY IT

1. In your next conversations, paraphrase what you heard before you respond.
2. Reflect both the facts and the feeling: “It sounds like…”
3. Double the number of times you paraphrase over the coming week.

ACTIVITY 04 30 min

The Appreciation List

Giving positive attention to the people around you builds trust and connection.

TRY IT

1. List people who handled a hard situation well, worked extra hard, or raised a concern recently.
2. Give each one specific, genuine positive attention this week.
3. Where you can, ask about their concerns and help resolve them.

ACTIVITY 05 10 min

Notice the Nonverbal

Much of what people feel shows up in posture, gesture, and expression, not words. Practice daily for a week.

TRY IT

1. Watch for nonverbal cues: clenched fists, smiles, boredom, defensive postures.
2. Guess what the person might be feeling, and why.

3. When their cues don't match their words, gently ask what they're thinking or feeling.

ACTIVITY 06 20 min

Resolve a Complaint

Turning a complaint into action shows people their concerns genuinely matter to you.

TRY IT

1. When someone complains about a workplace issue, write the issue down.
2. Identify at least one action you can take to help resolve it.
3. Follow through, and let the person know what you did.

SECTION 05

COMMON EMPATHY TRAPS

As you practice, watch for these common pitfalls. Naming them now makes them easier to catch in the moment.

01 **Confusing empathy with agreement**

Understanding how someone feels doesn't mean you must agree or give in. You can empathize fully and still hold a different position. Allow others to disagree without defending yourself or caving.

02 **Jumping to fix instead of feel**

Leaders often rush to solutions. Sometimes people need to be understood before they need to be helped. Sit with the feeling first.

03 **Interrupting and discounting**

Cutting people off, making insensitive judgments, or dismissing someone's opinion signals their feelings don't count. Ask a trusted colleague to count how often you interrupt.

04 **Selective empathy**

It's easy to empathize with people like us and harder with those who aren't. Watch for whose feelings you consistently overlook.

REFLECT

Which trap feels most familiar? How will you stay aware of it as you practice?

SECTION 06

YOUR 90-DAY PRACTICE

Lasting change comes from a few focused habits, practiced consistently and tracked honestly. Build your plan below, on your own or with your coach.

CHOOSE YOUR THREE HABITS

Based on everything above, which three habits will make the biggest difference in growing your Empathy over the next 90 days?

1

2

3

BUILD IN WEEKLY ACCOUNTABILITY

Write questions you can answer each week to measure progress and surface obstacles. The best ones are answered with “yes,” “no,” or a number.

Q1

Q2

Q3

Accountability partner: who will you share these with?

Completion date: when will you evaluate & celebrate?

Measurements of success

How will you celebrate?

SECTION 07

GO DEEPER

Keep building your Empathy with these resources. Explore them, then capture what stands out to you.

BOOK

The Complete Leader, Ch. 3.1: Empathy

The full framework and examples behind empathetic leadership.

PODCAST

The Complete Leader Podcast

Episodes 28, 68, 115, 154 & 155 explore empathy in practice.

ONLINE

Empathy competency library

Videos, articles, and podcasts at TheCompleteLeader.org.

CAPTURE YOUR INSIGHTS

As you work through these resources, which ideas most apply to your own growth in Empathy?

KEEP GOING

YOU'VE GOT THIS

Developing Empathy is an investment in yourself and everyone you lead. Return to this guide often: revisit the activities, reread the traps, and celebrate small wins along the way.

Every complete leader started exactly where you are now.