

FRICTION

INTERPERSONAL

Empathy That Doesn't Burn You Out

The Experiment: Deliberate Perspective-Taking

Duration: One week, applied to real interactions

Time required: 5–10 minutes of preparation per conversation

Goal: Build the habit of entering high-stakes conversations with the other person's frame of reference already in view.

This experiment targets cognitive empathy specifically, the practiced, deliberate act of stepping into another person's frame of reference before or during a high-stakes conversation. It is designed to build the muscle that most leaders have left largely undeveloped.

Step One: The Setup

Identify three conversations you will have this week that carry some emotional or relational weight. These might be a difficult one-on-one, a performance conversation, a team discussion where friction exists, or even a conversation with a peer where you sense misalignment. Write them down.

For each conversation, before it happens, spend five minutes answering the following questions in writing:

- What do I know—factually, not interpretively—about what this person is dealing with right now?

- What pressures, constraints, or concerns are most likely shaping how they are entering this conversation?

- What do I want from this conversation?

- What might they want, which could be different? What assumption am I most likely to bring in that could close down my ability to hear something new?

This is a structured interruption of the default tendency to enter conversations with your own frame already fully loaded. Writing it down matters because it slows the process enough to make it real.

Step Two: During the Conversation

Once in the conversation, hold one practice rule: Before you respond to anything emotionally significant that the other person says, pause and ask one clarifying question rather than offering your reaction, interpretation, or solution.

The question does not need to be sophisticated. Some of the most effective ones are simple:

- “Can you say more about that?”
- “What’s been the hardest part of this for you?”
- “What would be most useful from me right now?”

The pause and the question serve the same function: They create a brief interruption between what you hear and what you do with it. That interruption is where cognitive empathy lives.

Step Three: After Each Conversation

Write two sentences in response to each of the following:

- What did you learn about this person's experience that you did not know before?

- Where did I feel the pull to fix, advise, or redirect—and what did I do with that pull?

Here is what we think you might notice. You might discover that you knew far less about what your colleagues were experiencing than you assumed, which is uncomfortable but useful. Or you discover that asking one more question before responding changed the quality of the conversation in ways that neither directive advice nor emotional mirroring would have produced.

Cognitive empathy asks you to understand better than you do now, without necessarily feeling everything, without burning yourself down in the process. For most leaders, in most situations, this is the more useful form of empathy.