

# Empathy in the Workplace

A GOVLOOP TOOLKIT



# Introduction

Much of how we treat each other is based on empathy — or the lack of it. **If we don't take time to consider the feelings, opinions, experiences and perspectives of the people around us, then there is no foundation for respectful interactions or conversations.**

Many of us may have been taught empathy as a core value at a young age. However, exercising empathy in the workplace is a whole other challenge.

We aren't often trained, either as individuals or in a management or leadership position, how to practice empathy at work. And this lack of training or awareness around empathy in a professional setting can lead to a breakdown in communication, unfair circumstances and inequality among peers.

Fortunately, this toolkit is here to walk you through practical ways to foster empathy at work. You'll learn what empathy entails, as well as tactical steps to change your own behavior and contribute to an empathetic workplace culture that is inclusive and productive.

In this resource, we'll cover the following concepts in a worksheet-based format:

- Active Listening
- Constructive Feedback
- Empathy & Emotional Intelligence
- Conflict Management
- Unconscious Bias
- Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

## Empathy:

the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.

– Merriam-Webster Dictionary



# Active Listening Checklist

We listen all the time — to the radio, to music while we work, to our coworkers in meetings. But how often are we actually taking in what we hear?

There's a difference between passive and active listening, and it's important to strive for the latter in order to effectively empathize with and understand our interlocutors. To practice active listening, one must understand its components, and what it looks and feels like in practice. **Active listening is the process of concentrating fully on a speaker, understanding what they're saying and responding appropriately.**

Use this checklist to guide your next conversation and, with practice, you'll find that you can become a more empathetic and active listener.

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## Are you present?

- I've removed any possible distractions, such as an open email or my phone.
- I've cleared my mind of other thoughts and am giving all my attention to this conversation.

## Do you understand?

- I've found spaces in the conversation to confirm that I understand what's being said.
- I've allowed the speaker or speakers to clarify anything I might have misinterpreted.

## Are you contributing?

- At appropriate times, I have asked open-ended follow-up questions.
- I have shared my expertise and point of view where appropriate, without interrupting or shifting the focus of the conversation to myself.

## Is your mind open?

- I have set aside any preconceived notions I might have about the topic being discussed.
- I have set aside any preconceived notions I might have about the speaker, their background, their identity and their qualifications.
- I have made it clear that I respect the speaker and value their insights and input.

## Can you empathize?

- I have made an effort to place myself in the speaker's shoes and to examine the topic from their perspective.
- I am able to identify where I share common ground with the speaker, but I am also able to see and understand areas in which we might differ in our viewpoints.
- I have made a conscious and honest effort to understand who the speaker is, what they believe, and how their experiences may have shaped their ideas and opinions.

# Constructive Feedback Checklist

Whether you're in a supervisory position or an entry-level one, understanding how to give and receive feedback is an important part of doing your job well. As a manager and as a peer, you need to be able to provide honest, constructive criticism and praise.

**Meaningful feedback goes beyond simply giving compliments or pointing out errors**, and requires a conscious commitment to empathetic performance assessment. Feedback can help your organization. But, more importantly, it can benefit the person receiving it.

If you're not sure where to begin, or want to make sure that your feedback is appropriately given and impactful, use this checklist as a guide for the feedback process.

## ASK YOURSELF:

### Is this the appropriate situation?

- Is the setting private enough that the person will feel comfortable receiving honest feedback?
- Is it timely and relevant?

### Am I being vague or specific?

- Am I treating the person as an individual, with thoughts tailored to them specifically?
- Is my feedback too general to be valuable?

### Do I have proper standing and credibility?

- Am I the right person to be providing them with this feedback?
- Do I have the requisite knowledge or expertise to provide useful feedback, and have I considered what specialized knowledge they might have?
- Have I considered who else in my organization might be able to provide constructive, informed feedback in this situation?

### Am I providing the proper context?

- Is it clear what situation, event or behavior I am referring to?
- Have I explained how this feedback relates to a team or the organization as a whole?

### Am I providing actionable steps, if necessary?

- Is my feedback motivational, providing the subject with a path forward?
- Do I view myself as a partner in the feedback, committed to working with them to improve what needs to be improved?
- Are my intentions to uplift the other person by providing constructive criticism?

### Have I taken into account the feelings and perspective of my subject?

- Have I made an effort to understand this person's preferred style for receiving feedback?
- Have I considered things from their perspective, and made an effort to place myself in their shoes?
- Am I taking into account their unique background, identities and experiences?

# Empathy & Emotional Intelligence Checklist

Traditionally, most professionals are taught that they have to be competitive and cunning to get ahead in the workplace. However, a new trend is on the rise that sees employees and leaders focus on promoting empathy and emotional intelligence— and for good reason. **Empathy is the ability to understand another person’s situation or perspective, while emotional intelligence is how good you are at communicating and managing emotions and feelings.**

Although a little competition in the workplace can be good, exercising empathy and emotional intelligence in your office can make you a better employee, leader and friend. By putting yourself in other peoples’ shoes and staying cognizant of their feelings, you have the opportunity to foster more productive communication and efficiently drive your agency’s mission.

So how can you make sure you are using empathy and emotional intelligence on a daily basis at work?

Follow this checklist and try to check off as many as possible throughout the day:

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- I did not become defensive when criticized
  - I worked to inspire others instead of bringing them down
  - I set realistic expectations with colleagues and subordinates
  - I maintained a sense of humor in the face of adversity
  - I showed compassion to my colleagues today
  - I thought about what I was going to say before I jumped into a conversation
  - I tried to see things from my coworker’s perspective
  - I openly discussed my feelings when necessary
  - I practiced active listening
  - I admitted when I made a mistake
  - I asked when I didn’t understand something
  - I cultivated an environment of compassion
  - I recognized how my behavior can impact others
  - I embraced an opposite point of view
  - I compromised with my teammates

# Conflict Management Worksheet

Understanding both your own style of conflict management and that of the person with whom you are speaking will help you to respectfully and successfully navigate disagreements when they arise.

Knowledge of how the other person thinks and reacts will allow you to practice empathy and approach your interaction with them from a place of understanding rather than judgement.

By guiding the dialogue in a way that sets people at ease and is informed by their natural tendencies and preferences, you can turn what might have been a contentious discussion into a productive one.

**Learn what your conflict style is by taking the GovLoop quiz.** Then, use this cheat sheet to master your next difficult conversation.



Use this chart to identify the common habits of your partner in conflict, as well as how you can help them engage in successful conflict resolution

If you are:	Competing	Collaborating	Avoiding	Accommodating	Compromising
<p>And your partner is <b>Competing</b></p>	<p>You are both likely to strongly voice your opinions, leading to a more contentious conflict.</p> <p>Encourage taking time before conflict to reflect and prioritize needs.</p>	<p>Your partner is unlikely to seek time or space to find a collaborative solution.</p> <p>Encourage them to be patient to build the best outcome.</p>	<p>Your partner is likely to make decisions without you if you don't speak up.</p> <p>Encourage them to listen to your concerns with an open mind.</p>	<p>Your partner is unlikely to push you for more insight into a conflict.</p> <p>Encourage them to be patient to build the best outcome.</p>	<p>Your partner is likely to see your preferred middle-ground solution as a loss.</p> <p>Encourage them to compromise for the sake of longer-term team success.</p>
<p>And your partner is <b>Collaborating</b></p>	<p>Your partner will likely want to invest more time than you on finding mutually beneficial outcomes.</p> <p>Encourage them to highlight the benefits of their approach to you and your team.</p>	<p><b>You are both likely to spend significant time and energy coming to mutually beneficial solutions.</b></p> <p><b>Establish a decision timeline to set parameters for yourselves.</b></p>	<p>Your partner is likely to spend more thought and time on a conflict than you.</p> <p>Set personal or time limits to your resolution discussions before starting.</p>	<p>Your partner will likely resist your accommodations, seeking more fulfilling resolutions instead.</p> <p>Clarify your priorities and justify any concessions you want to make.</p>	<p>Your partner will likely seek a more mutually beneficial solution than you feel is necessary.</p> <p>Ask your partner to prioritize their needs, and set expectations that all might not be met.</p>
<p>And your partner is <b>Avoiding</b></p>	<p>Your partner will likely shy away from conversation.</p> <p>Encourage your partner to voice their opinions while you patiently listen.</p>	<p>Your partner is likely to seek ways to minimize discussion on conflict.</p> <p>Encourage them to see potential positive outcomes of addressing conflict.</p>	<p><b>Your partner is likely to act like there is no conflict, as are you.</b></p> <p><b>Resolve for you both to devote time to conflict, even if that requires you to take the lead.</b></p>	<p>Your partner is likely to accept your accommodations as resolutions to conflict.</p> <p>Clearly state what outcomes you need to consider the conflict resolved.</p>	<p>Your partner is likely to defer to your proposed solution if presented.</p> <p>Ask for your partner's input before considering the conflict resolved.</p>
<p>And your partner is <b>Accommodating</b></p>	<p>Your partner is unlikely to assert their ideas, even when they are best.</p> <p>Resolve to accept at least one of your partner's ideas in your final outcome.</p>	<p>Your partner is likely to sacrifice their ideas to resolve conflict.</p> <p>Highlight the importance of various viewpoints in conflict resolution.</p>	<p>Your partner is likely to default to your preference</p> <p>Ask for your partner's opinions before stating your own.</p>	<p><b>You are both likely to agree on the first solution presented, even if needs aren't met.</b></p> <p><b>Commit to incorporating one idea from each partner in the final solution.</b></p>	<p>Your partner is unlikely to push back if they feel you are making too many concessions.</p> <p>Create a list of must-have outcomes before resolution discussions.</p>
<p>And your partner is <b>Compromising</b></p>	<p>Your partner is likely to focus on resolution, even if your needs aren't met.</p> <p>Encourage your partner to consider how quick decisions might negatively impact long-term goals.</p>	<p>Your partner is likely to accept a solution quicker than you are, for the sake of completion.</p> <p>Collaboratively set a single goal before engaging in decision-making.</p>	<p>Your partner is likely to offer concessions as a starting point to conflict resolution.</p> <p>Don't use your participation as a bargaining chip in resolution.</p>	<p>Your partner is likely to accept your concessions but seek more discussion before resolution.</p> <p>Identify and explain your "must-have" outcomes, in addition to potential concessions.</p>	<p><b>You are both likely to accept the most expedient solution, even if it doesn't fully meet your needs.</b></p> <p><b>Work together to create a list of must-haves in your outcome, before discussion.</b></p>

# Unconscious Bias Checklist

Sometimes biases can be trivial, like preferring the color blue over orange. Other times, they can significantly impact people's lives and careers. In 2019, a report by the Center for Talent Innovation found that 71% of leaders select proteges who are of the same gender and race.

"What does that mean for how we reinforce what leadership looks like?" asked Pamela Fuller, Thought Leader of Inclusion & Bias at FranklinCovey, a management consulting firm. Fuller spoke at the 2020 NextGen Government Training Summit.

These biases not only impact the people on the receiving end — the employee who is consistently passed over for promotions, or the team member whose name is constantly mispronounced — but the organization as well. **Biased behavior harms employee performance, which ultimately impacts agency performance.**

Check your biases by taking a moment to review these takeaways.

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## Know that you are biased.

If you are human, you are biased. Our biases are formed from the content we consume, the education and training we receive, our culture, our born preferences and all our lived experiences. It's important to start by admitting you are biased, even if you don't know in what ways yet.

## Reflect on your biases, known and unknown.

To become aware of unconscious biases requires self-reflection. You must be able to identify your biases first before you can change biased behavior. Once you can identify them, they are no longer unconscious.

## Cultivate meaningful relationships with people to see past your bias.

You can't fix biases on your own. In the absence of information, our brains tend to create stories for the gaps. That's why it's critical to be intentional about developing meaningful connections with other people, Fuller said. These meaningful connections can challenge biases in a good way.

## Confront bias.

Tackle bias by approaching it as a strategy that can either improve [or harm] your workplace. Avoiding bias doesn't stop division. As whole people, we bring all the facets of our identity to work, whether we log into a computer or walk through the office doors. That means we bring all our biases to work as well. We need to effectively address bias by approaching it strategically, just like any other business initiative. Confront bias by speaking up, amplifying others' voices, enacting group strategies, organizing networks and offering support.



# Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Checklist

How do you make diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) part of your agency's culture? Like all cultural challenges, it's difficult but doable. And it's an essential part to a thriving workplace.

First, let's define the terms. **Diversity** refers to all the ways an individual or group is different from another, from gender, race and age to ideas, perspectives and values. **Inclusion** is the act of creating an environment where all these differences are welcomed and valued for people to fully participate. You can have a diverse group that isn't necessarily inclusive. **Equity** is the act of providing fair opportunities to groups of people, especially by eliminating barriers that have hindered or marginalized certain groups. A truly diverse and inclusive space is an equitable one as well.

Take a moment to learn how your workplace can be equitable, inclusive, diverse and better equipped to flourish.

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## **Reconfigure recruitment and hiring processes to be inclusive.**

Obstacles that prevent the success of job seekers from underrepresented populations include testing processes, unpaid internships and exclusive language in job postings. Discard practices that keep people out.

## **Ensure managers are equipped to be inclusive.**

Once people are in, it's just as important that they stay. Inclusive hiring practices can mean naught if people leave due to an unsupportive environment. One of the main ways you can create a healthy culture is by making sure managers are equipped to support all team members.

## **Establish and promote metrics and accountability.**

Metrics can be an important accountability tool to measure progress and maintain commitments, particularly when it comes to equity. It's important to leverage employee feedback too.

## **Foster collaboration between departments.**

For example, newly created offices of diversity and longstanding HR departments need to collaborate to drive diversity initiatives forward. It has to be a whole agency effort or it won't result in the desired cultural change.

## **Get outside help.**

Cultural changes are notoriously difficult. Luckily, there are experts who can help. Reach out to DEI experts and consultants who can guide your organization through these changes.

## Conclusion

We hope you found this toolkit and the tactical steps and checklists included helpful for understanding and practicing empathy at work.

Much like other soft skills, **empathy takes consistent practice**. We encourage you to refer back to this resource often to make sure you're keeping empathy top of mind. Real change begins with individual actions. So remember to talk to those around you, be it your boss or colleagues, about how you all can collectively create an empathetic workplace together.

*No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.*

- Aesop



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