

Enabling leadership using dispositions in Standard 1

Elaborations and scenarios to guide your development of:

Focus Area: Empathy
within the Australian Professional
Standards for Middle Leaders



Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands, sea countries, and waterways from across Australia. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and living cultures; and to Elders past and present.

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Focus Area: Empathy

Definition in the *Australian Professional Standards for Middle Leaders*

The ability to listen carefully and remain sensitive to another's perspectives and emotions by setting aside any preconceived judgements and demonstrating genuine care about the lives, learning and wellbeing of their students, colleagues and school community.

Elaboration of the definition

Leaders with an empathic disposition have the ability to “understand and share another person's feelings and emotions—to see things from the perspective of another and understand another's point of view” (Tomlinson & Murphy, 2018, p. 20). Empathic leaders listen carefully and are sensitive to others' expressed and unexpressed feelings.

There are four components to empathy:

1. taking another's perspective – to understand, through various forms of inquiry, how and why they experience the situation as they do.
2. setting aside any pre-judgments about others' feelings and actions, for such prejudgments prevent careful listening. The evidence of this listening is that the leader summarises what the other person has said, and the other person confirms the summary is accurate. Any subsequent critical evaluation should be done collaboratively once the other person trusts that the leader has understood what they are experiencing.
3. recognising others' expressed and unexpressed emotions.
4. communicating the emotion the leader has recognised in order to check the accuracy of his or her perception. Empathic leaders are open-minded about the accuracy of their perception of others' emotions, so they disclose and check their attributions rather than assume their validity.

It is more difficult to recognise and respond empathically to negative than to positive emotions, particularly when the leader is the source of the negativity. In those situations, empathic leaders build trust by communicating the emotion they see, checking for accuracy and inquiring into the reasons for the negative emotion.

Empathy is one part of emotional intelligence, which can be defined as “skills and/or abilities that enable awareness of the emotional states of oneself and others and the capacity to regulate or use emotions to positively affect role performance” (Mattingly & Kraiger, 2019, p. 140). This definition suggests the important link between awareness and regulation of one's own emotions and the ability to respond empathically to others' emotions. Recognising particular emotions in others requires recognition and acceptance of our own emotions.

An empathic disposition complements that of interpersonal courage, for the more empathic the leader, the more they will be courageous in respectful rather than disrespectful ways.

Why is empathy important in education?

Leaders and teachers are charged with meeting the learning needs of their students and they cannot discover what those needs are and how to meet them, especially for struggling students, without empathy. An empathic disposition enables them to build the trust needed to discover how students are experiencing their teachers, lessons, and schooling (Tomlinson & Murphy, 2018).

Improvement typically requires collective commitment and effort. Empathic leaders create such commitment by being open about what is involved and empathising with rather than being controlled by the difficulties others anticipate and experience. In the face of resistance, empathic leaders control their frustration and defensiveness in order to learn why others disagree, and why their expectations have not been met. They refrain from judging and evaluating until the other person has told them that they feel understood. Only then do they offer their own evaluation and explain more about what they are seeking and why (Robinson, 2018).

What is it not?

Empathic educational leaders are not overempathic. They do not sacrifice their role-related responsibilities in the interest of being empathic. Their role is not that of guidance counsellor. While their empathy enables them to learn more about, for example, how staff are experiencing aspects of their job, they may still need to follow their inquiries and check with a respectful critique of what has or has not been happening, and with collaborative planning of the next steps.

Empathy should be distinguished from sympathy, which is “a soft, tender emotion of pity and concern that is associated with imagining the plight of another person” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 330). Unlike empathy, sympathy is sometimes expressed in ways that attempt to reduce or redirect others’ negative emotions.

Motivations

The empathy of educational leaders is motivated by a deep desire to understand their staff and students – not in an intrusive sense – but to understand and appreciate their role-related beliefs, attitudes, and feelings. When things go wrong, empathetic leaders get curious, not furious. They are driven to find out, from the other’s point of view, what has happened and why. Their non-judgmental, curious stance enables them to make the effort required to understand others in their own terms, to persist in such efforts, and to walk in their shoes to better meet the individual’s and wider school community’s needs.

Scenarios illustrating increasing levels of empathy

Scenario: A leader’s empathy for a teacher

For the last month, Joshua, the Dean of Year 9 students, has noticed that Ngaire, one of his most experienced teachers, has been coming late to school. On two occasions he has noticed that her first class has been noisy and unsupervised for up to 10 minutes after the bell.

Proficient

At first, Joshua felt really angry that Ngaire’s lateness had left her class unsupervised. He decided to talk with Ngaire and recognised that he had to set aside his prejudgments and anger if he was to have a productive conversation and find out what was going on. When he met with Ngaire she confirmed her lateness and described how she was having increasing difficulty getting to school on time because her husband’s arthritis was getting worse. He needed considerable help in the morning getting out of bed and into a wheelchair and she wanted to make sure he was ok before leaving him to go to school. He did have help from a visiting nurse, but not first thing in the morning.

Joshua thanked Ngaire for her explanation and wondered out loud about the bind she must feel between looking after her husband and getting to school on time. This helped Ngaire to talk about just how worried she felt about the inevitable progression of his condition and its implications for her continuing in a role she loved. The conversation ended with Joshua requesting that Ngaire prepare her classes by ensuring they had good routines for getting started, with or without her presence, and that she always phoned the school if she was going to be late.

Accomplished

In the next few months, Ngaire did phone the school when she was going to be late and made sure her students knew what to do if she was late. While Joshua was pleased that Ngaire had made this effort, and told her so, he was still concerned because Ngaire's lateness was now about once a week. He indicated to her that he needed to consider not only Ngaire's situation and feelings but those of her students and her colleagues. Quite apart from legal obligations to have students supervised, Ngaire's lateness reduced their opportunity to learn. Her colleagues were also impacted by her absence from before-school briefings and team meetings. They had told him they were disappointed she could not be present, and he had asked them to reach out to her and see if she was willing to talk with them about her lateness. On hearing this, Ngaire became really upset and talked again about how she was torn between her job and the needs of her husband.

Joshua was genuine in his acknowledgement of just how difficult the situation was for Ngaire and suggested that they both independently seek advice about how the dilemma could be resolved in ways that met the interests of Ngaire, of her students, and of the wider school.

Expert

A week later, Ngaire and Joshua met again to share their ideas about how the situation could be resolved. Ngaire admitted she had been so upset she hadn't come up with any ideas and was afraid she might lose her job. Joshua acknowledged her fear and her courage in expressing it. He was genuine in saying that he didn't want her to lose her job, but thought that, for the time being, moving to a part-time role was preferable. He listened carefully to Ngaire's reaction and probed her fears about earning less. The next step was probably to take some part-time options to the principal and seek his reaction. Ngaire expressed her gratitude for Joshua's support and asked him to go with her to the meeting with the principal.

Discussion Starters

1. What are the situations in which you find it more and less easy to demonstrate empathy? How could you practice being more empathic when needed? Consider your relationships with staff and students.
2. Do you disclose and check your attributions about how others are feeling?
3. How accurately are you able to identify and name your own emotions? When is it easier or harder?
4. Do you have any strong beliefs about specific topics, such as explicit teaching, inquiry learning or mobile phones in class? Think about how to be empathetic with people who are strongly opposed to your views.

References

Brene Brown empathy versus sympathy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jz1g1SpD9Zo>

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Core Reading

Tomlinson, C. A., & Murphy, M. (2018). The empathetic school. *Educational Leadership*, 75(6), 22-27.

The logo for AITSL, featuring the lowercase letters 'aitsl' in a sans-serif font. The letters are colored with a gradient from light green to dark teal.

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A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consisting of two overlapping triangles. The left triangle is dark teal and points to the right. The right triangle is light green and points to the left. They meet at a central point on the horizontal axis.

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