

Other People's Pain

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Empathy is critical if we want to help other people in their time of need. There ought to be a course somewhere in the education system on EMP-101. This article brings up some cautions about how we express our empathy when people are in crises.

You will hear the phrase "I know how you feel" perhaps thousands of times in your lifetime. The truth is that other people can never fully feel your pain. They may be able to approximate it based on their own experiences. They may be able to logically deduce how you feel by extrapolating the situation, how you look, and the things you say, but they can never fully experience what you are going through.

Far better to say something like, "I can't imagine how difficult that must be for you." Since you cannot put yourself fully in the other person's shoes, why utter banal phrases that make it seem like you can?

I will direct this article mostly to what is called "Professional Hurt" which is a term I learned recently from Dr. Ruby Brown from Jamaica, who coined the phrase several years ago. I met Ruby while speaking at the Caribbean Leadership Program in Trinidad. She wrote her dissertation on the topic of Professional Hurt, which is when a person in a professional setting is abused somehow by managers or circumstances beyond control. Professional Hurt also would occur when a person gets demoted or is fired. It may be the result of being passed over for a promotion or being marginalized in any number of ways.

When someone else is hurting, spend more time listening to the person. Avoid the temptation to say, "Oh that is just like how I felt last year when I was not given the raise they promised me." That is not going to make the other person feel any better. Listening to stories of people who are worse off or have had the same problem does not relieve the person's pain today. Rather, ask thoughtful questions if the person wants to talk or just be present if the person is in shock or unable to verbalize the pain.

Body language is particularly important when dealing with another person who is in a crisis. You can show that you care more with your eyes and facial expression than you can with a constant stream of babble. Just listening and nodding may be the best thing you can do for the other person at that moment.

Logic is not a good approach. You may be tempted to cheer the person up by saying, "These things don't last forever; you'll be feeling better soon." Not only does that kind of approach backfire, it can belittle the person who is suffering to imply that time alone will heal the wounds.

Try to avoid hackneyed expressions that are commonly used in the working world. If your friend has just been fired, don't tell him, "Whenever one door is closed, another will open." Do not try to cheer him up with "Nobody likes working for that jerk anyway." Shut your trap and take your cues from the person who is hurting.

Let your presence and body language do the talking for you. If it seems the other person is in need of a steady stream of words from someone, then you can perhaps help with phrases like, "you're strong enough to overcome this," or "what would you like to happen now," but the laconic approach is usually superior.

Do not recount how your neighbor had the same situation and ended up with a big promotion. All those kind of phrases may make you feel like you are helping, but in reality little real comfort is coming through the overused phrases or comparisons.

Above all, recognize that you do not know how the other person is feeling and the best thing you can do is admit that. Show your love and feeling by avoiding the typical mistakes made by well intended people who were never offered a course in EMP-101 in school.

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