



BY DENNIS SPARKS

Leaders Listen With Empathy

When we move out of ourselves and into the other person's experience, seeing the world with that person, as if we were that person, we are practicing empathy.

—Arthur Ciaramicoli & Katherine Ketcham

Civility is the bedrock of productive and supportive relationships within schools. An essential building block of that civility is leaders' ability to demonstrate empathy for the experience of others within the school community. "Being aware of others is where civility begins," P. M. Forni writes in *The Civility Solution: What to Do When People Are Rude*. "To be fully aware of them, we must weave empathy into the fabric of our connection. . . . The empathy of strangers is good for us not just because it makes us feel better about ourselves and about life, but also because it encourages us to be better persons. Empathy is wonderfully contagious."

In my experience, leaders' lack of empathy is a leading cause of interpersonal problems in the workplace. Empathic leaders are able to fully and deeply hear what others say, convey both verbally and nonverbally that they understand that person's perspective and experience, and communicate respect for the individual who is speaking. Through their words and demeanor they communicate to others the value of both the message and the messenger.

While these ideas are easy to explain, they are very demanding to implement in the intense and fast-paced lives of school leaders. Too often leaders inadvertently communicate disrespect by assuming that they know what speakers will say and cutting them off. Leaders "highjack" speakers' stories to focus on things the leaders regard as more worthy of discussion, or they demonstrate inattention and disinterest by glancing at their computer screens or cell phones. On the other hand, leaders who listen with empathy understand the power of silence as a primary listening tool and demonstrate respect for what the speaker is saying through such simple but often neglected practices as making eye contact and demonstrating through facial expressions and posture an attunement with the speaker's feelings. (Read more about this in [Vol. 2, No. 3](#).)

"The quality of our listening is as good a measure of our humanity as any. . .," Forni says. "When we find the strength to engage in considerate listening we are in fact expressing ourselves. At our best." When leaders listen attentively to deeply understand the experiences and perspectives of others and demonstrate through word and demeanor that understanding, they truly lead through learning.

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