

Building Bridges with Empathy

To communicate effectively with others, you must believe that:

- Understanding is as important as being understood.
- Listening is as important as being listened to.
- Caring is as important as being cared about.
- Other people's ideas are as important as your ideas.
- Giving respect is as important as receiving it.

Imagine two people standing across a wide expanse from one another, each with their own intentions, perspectives, ideas, interests, positions, feelings, and concerns. They would like to have a conversation that resolves a problem they share, but the conversation is difficult because the expanse represents a large gap in their understanding of one another. The only way that they can solve the problem in mutually beneficial ways is to build a bridge of understanding across this gap separating them.

On whose side of the gap do you start to build the bridge?

When two people disagree, each person might experience the other person's position as an attack. People under attack become defensive. The sender begins to build the bridge of understanding from her side of the ravine. The receiver, in response, senses his position as being under attack, and so he begins to build the bridge of understanding from his side of the ravine. The result, of course, is that instead of understanding taking place, you end up with a debate in which each person is trying to get the other to come over to his or her side, and the bridge never gets built. Consider this example:

Charlie: *Sally, I thought we decided that we were going to roll out the product by the end of the month.*

Sally: *No Charlie, we don't have a firm date, because the quality team hasn't come back with its final results.*

Charlie: *The quality team members need to work with our timeline, if we let them set the timeline, we'll be here until next year.*

Sally: *They are moving as fast as they can, and they aren't going to compromise their results.*

Charlie: *Look, my salespeople are already taking orders and promising delivery. There are a lot of people who are depending on an end-of-month suspense date.*

Sally: *Charlie, your sales team is putting the cart before the horse. I can't make that promise.*

When two people try to persuade each other with compelling reasons, they are rarely able to persuade each other's emotional states. The more Charlie feels his timeline slipping away, the more emotional he will get defending his side of the conversation. The more Sally feels the concerns of the quality team are not being respected, the more emotional she will get about defending her position. Sally and Charlie's conversation will keep going back and forth in a stalemate, until one of them changes the rules of engagement. Clearly, these rules of engagement should not be determined by the emotional brain. It requires effort and thoughtfulness. This conversation will be much more productive if either Charlie or Sally begins to build the bridge of understanding from the other person's side of the ravine. The principle is simply this:

If you want to influence people, you need to understand empathically the power of their point of view and to feel the emotional force with which they believe it.