



The Top 5 Soft Skills to *Transform* Your Relationships

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Relationships are hard. Some more than others, but all require a significant investment of time, emotion, and mental capacity. In this short resource, we'll highlight the top 5 soft skills to invest in developing to transform all of your relationships--from work to home and beyond.

If you invest time in both the exercises at the end of each skill and then at applying them into your everyday relationships, you can look forward to the effects of a positive transformation.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to experience something from someone else's perspective.

Your day was going so well.

The weather was beautiful, and you got a run in before work. Your boss scheduled a coffee meeting with you and announced you had won the promotion you were working so hard to land. You swung by the store on the way home to pick up a bottle of champagne, excited to share the good news with your partner.

Unfortunately, your partner has *not* had a good day. They enter the house without a word and slam the door, grabbing a bottle of beer before retreating to the bedroom.

How do you respond?

This is a frustrating moment for anyone. It's natural to want to celebrate life's joys with those closest to us. The danger is that a pendulum swing of emotion can take

us past a healthy disappointment into resentment. Balancing this natural overreaction is a prime use of *empathy*, especially in longstanding relationships.

First, try a little bit of make-believe. Tell yourself the story of what might have happened to make this emotional response entirely appropriate. Craft at least three potential scenarios in your head, ideally with varying degrees of severity--Maybe someone close to them died, maybe they were laid off, maybe a driver cussed them out and flipped them off on the way home. This simple fact gets your focus off your reaction to their emotional impact on *you* and shifts it to *their* internal experience.

Merriam Webster defines *empathy* as “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.” It’s practical application is the ability to “put yourself in someone else’s shoes” and look at things from their perspective.

This storytelling exercise is an excellent one to employ in all kinds of frustrating situations--when you’re cut off in traffic, when a client or coworker is rude to you, or when someone neglects to invite you to an event.

This is not to say that these exercises are the truth. They may bear some semblance to reality or they may not. Sometimes people act unkindly because *they* don’t move through the world with *empathy* and therefore don’t concern themselves with the impact their actions have on others. So yeah, the guy in the Mercedes *may*

have been an entitled jerk. The point of telling these stories, however, is not for them, but us. These are emotional weight lifting exercises. They're the method, not the goal.

When you're finally in a conversation with your angry, tearful partner, you can use these emotional muscles to listen to the story of their day from their point of view. Offer genuine condolences or encouragement, as needed, and then use the energy from your great day to lift them up and out of their terrible one.

Maybe even pop a bottle of champagne...

Exercise 1: If you regularly find yourself in conflict with someone close to you--a romantic partner, for example, pick a common argument you have, try swapping positions, and argue for their point of view.

Exercise 2: Once a week, pick the most frustrating encounter (the driver in front of you going 5 miles under the speed limit, the team member in your weekly meeting who droned on for fifteen minutes about what was going on in their life), and then tell yourself a story about what happened to them that day, week, or during their life to make that behavior not just acceptable, but completely understandable. Avoid excessive drama. What circumstances would cause you to react similarly?

Exercise 3: Once a week, reflect on your habits. What is something you did this week that might have provoked a negative reaction? What sort of negative stories might people have been writing about you in their head (when you cut them off while driving, for example, or took the last bottle of wine on sale).

Curiosity

Curiosity is an interest in things outside of ourselves.

“But wasn’t it *curiosity* that killed the cat?”

The desire to know more can certainly get you into trouble, but fortunately, it can also get you back out again.

Curiosity is valuable because a desire to understand how and why things are the way they are--how they work, how they fit together, and why people behave the way they do--can only bolster such things as problem-solving skills. You will not only enter the problem with an already better understanding of how the different elements work, but your *curiosity* will drive you into a deeper understanding of how those parts fit together--and how their interaction could be improved.

If you want to invest in relationships (this is about transforming relationships, after all), being curious about people--their likes and dislikes--is a great way to do it. We all thrive when others are interested in us.

But of course, this interest has to be genuine. When you only learn about others to manipulate, this is not real curiosity (that is, it’s not free of an ulterior motive), nor will it transform your relationships in any healthy capacity.

Start asking questions and waiting to hear the answers--asking questions and then follow-ups--and be amazed at how open people start to become with you. It doesn’t take a psychology degree. “Tell me a little more about that” is often all that’s needed as long as you’re committed to listening with an open and engaged mind.

Exercise 1: To increase your capacity for *curiosity*, pick 5 people, things, or situations you encounter each day and then list 5 things you'd like to know more about each one.

Exercise 2: Before a meeting or a dinner with a coworker or friend, make a list of things they're experts in. Take several minutes at the beginning or end of your conversation to ask them how they got interested in their subject.

Exercise 3: What did you want to be when you grew up? A firefighter? An astronaut? A veterinarian? What would you have had to study if you had entered those fields? Set aside time every week for three months to learn more about those things.

Humility

Humility is the awareness of your place in the universe.

You may think you're a sun with a whole solar system revolving around you, but that solar system is barely a blip in the magnitude of galaxies out there. You can wield a lot of power in your particular sphere and still be ultimately inconsequential in the largest scheme of things.

Does that sound dramatic? Well, it kind of is. *Humility* is not about looking down on yourself or saying you're bad at something when you're not. But it does require you to have the perspective of how important you are in the scheme of things--not very--and areas in which you should grow--many, as have we all.

It's the yearly all-staff meeting. As the team manager, you've just finished reporting to the entire company your previous year's achievements and next year's projections. You finish, smiling, and look around. "Any questions?" One of your teammates, an accountant, raises their hand. "Um, I think your math is wrong. You've projected a 15% increase when based on last year's numbers it should be 5%."

How do you respond?

It's easy in these situations to put your team member in their place. After all, you're the one with the mic and the slideshow. And they just humiliated you in front of the entire team. Or at least, that's one way of looking at it. How you respond will be partly dictated by the culture of the company. Do you invite the person on stage to work out the math there? Maybe, but probably not. There are other agenda items for the meeting. Instead, you can take the humble route. "It seems I may have made a

math error in my calculations. I'll be sitting down with Chad later today to double-check my work, and I'll send you all a follow-up email with the results. In the meantime, does anyone have any questions on any other portion of the presentation?"

A person can be both humble and aware of their strengths, humble and yet confident. It is not a belief in your inferiority, but simply that you have a lot more to learn and anyone can be your teacher. This leads you to be open to other's ideas, perspectives, and experiences.

Exercise 1: Rather than fortifying things you know you're good at, invest in education in areas you struggle in. Use your *curiosity* to engage people in conversations on topics where they know more than you. Take a class--in something that you're fascinated with but not naturally gifted in. Maybe attempt to learn an instrument or take up pottery, try out a community center French class or join a chess club. What kind of person do you *want* to be. Identify your weak spots first.

Exercise 2: Try to say "I don't know" five times this week. Make it a goal instead of a phrase to avoid. The simple act of admitting it will help you overcome your fear.

Exercise 3: For everything you're good at, find 3-5 people who are better than you. Where do you get your artistic inspiration? Who are your business leader mentors? When people compliment your skills, thank them, and then be prepared to share the compliment with those you learned from.

Teamwork

Teamwork is the harnessing of each group members' strengths for a stronger result than the sum of the separate parts.

The challenge of working in a team is different for everyone. For some, the extra deadlines or *communication* requirements of *teamwork* can feel stifling. For others, it's the trust required of their teammates that's a challenge. "How do I know something is done well if I don't do it myself?" Regardless of where you struggle, it's worth your time to improve in this area because *teamwork* is an unavoidable part of life. It's required at the office, with romantic partners, in raising children, in politics and community affairs. We work together with our lawyers, accountants, social workers, customer service representatives, and so many others every day that it's easy to forget it's what we're doing.

Did you ask the barista for a double shot, extra cold, 20oz, ginger mocha swirl non-fat, almond milk, latte explosion? Did the barista provide you with what you asked for? Did you pay and tip? Congratulations! You successfully engaged in teamwork! You clearly provided expectations, they delivered, and then you fulfilled your remaining obligations.

Exercise 1: Identify the day to day interactions that require *teamwork*: placing your order at the coffee shop, your weekly one-on-one with your manager, date night with your spouse. Write out your role in that particular team. (For example: to clearly and definitively communicate my coffee order in a pleasant manner; to identify my progress toward my goals, list my next steps, and actively receive feedback; to plan an evening that will be special for my spouse, recognizes their interests over my own, and doesn't blow our budget.)

Exercise 2: Pick a team you're a member of where teamwork frequently breaks down. Pick one *point* of breakdown where *you* will hold yourself *100%* accountable for the success or failure.

Exercise 3: In a team, you're part of, pick a common task you perform together. Layout the different pieces of the task and identify who is usually responsible for each piece. Then go through the task several times with different team members swapping roles so everyone's done everything on the task list and understands what's required of their teammates.

Communication

Communication is the offering and receiving of information in a respectful and balanced relationship.

We often think of good *communication's* purpose as bringing people around to our way of seeing things, but the truth is more complicated than that. Good *communication* requires a give and take--a balance of standing up for our principles and listening honestly and openly to those of others. There are elements of *empathy, curiosity, humility, and teamwork* shot straight through excellent *communication*.

When approaching a challenging conversation, we need to ask ourselves about the natural tendencies of both ourselves and our conversational partners. Are we more likely to shout or to allow ourselves to become doormats? Once we have an idea of the styles in the room, a conversation becomes an unusual game of tennis with each partner--ideally--focusing their energy on keeping the ball in the air and moving together.

Did you ever play improv games in school? At the beginning of a scene, whoever gets an idea just starts moving and talking and it's your job as their partner to add to everything they're coming up with, and never to just say "no." Why? Because "no" ends the scene.

"Ah, it's my long lost son John!"

"No."

"Er--ah, I mean, my old pal Slimy from the Army."

"No."

"Can I get you some coffee?"

"No."

Do you see the problem? You're not contributing! Not only is your partner doing all of the work, but that work isn't going anywhere. So in improv, the first and most important rule is you always meet each new offer of information from your partner with "Yes, and..." You affirm their choice and add onto it, which gives them something to affirm and build on in return.

Now, obviously, that works inside the game, but what about life? While outside of improv, it is sometimes appropriate and necessary to say "No," try using "No, but" instead of simply ending the conversation. You're still meeting your conversational partner and offering them something they can build on.

"Can I meet James and Samantha at the pool?"

"No, but you're welcome to invite them here. We can get out the sprinkler and you can have a water balloon fight."

In this case (instead of with, say, "Yes, but"), the "but" opens up new opportunities the other person may not have considered. Rather than ending the conversation because the first offer was not a success, you open new doors to new possibilities.

"Yes, and" and "No, but." --rather than looking for every opportunity to disagree and "prove your point," you're looking for every opportunity to take a block of shared understanding to add to your *communication* tower. Look for blocks that are hiding from view because of an unexpected shade of context or color of word choice.

Exercise 1: Identify what habits you have that “drop the conversational ball.” List out ways you can keep it moving. Ask a friend to practice with you. Pick opposite sides as in a debate, but rather than “win,” your goal is to engage with, and build off of each other’s points.

Exercise 2: Start with a pile of blocks in between you and a partner. Pick a topic to discuss where you disagree, such as how to spend your tax refund or what to do on Saturday. Try to build a tower as you have your discussion. Every time “No, but” is used, add one block to the tower, and every time “Yes, and” is used, two blocks are added to the tower.

Exercise 3: Before your next meeting with a friend or colleague with whom you frequently disagree, write out your conversational partner’s point of view as far as you understand it as if you were them. (Using “I” language.) Do so again, after your next meeting. Highlight any new clarity you received in your conversation.

Developing soft skills will always be work and will always take time. There is not a magic, quick fix for transformation, and people who tell you there is, are lying.

However, some doors are open to you, you just need to walk through.