Empathy is an emotional skill that is built through understanding others. It is largely understood as the ability to understand another’s pain, and to consider the complexity behind another person’s perspective. It is the ability to “put yourself in another person’s shoes.”

How is empathy different from sympathy?
Sympathy is feeling compassion, sorrow, or pity for the hardships of another person. Empathy is putting yourself in the shoes of another to experience their perspective.

Why is it important?
Empathy strengthens our ability to understand the views of others. That leads to helping behavior, which benefits our relationship to others.

Why do I need it?
It is a crucial skill for workplace success. Being able to understand the needs of people around you allows you to treat them according to how they want to be treated. You’ll also be better equipped to deal with conflict, to motivate the people around you, and become a better leader, worker, and friend.

How do I learn it?
You must practice it regularly when you interact with people. Put aside your viewpoint. Pay attention physically and mentally to what’s happening and being said. Listen carefully and note keywords and phrases being used. Respond encouragingly.

By simply increasing your interest in what others think, feel, and experience — you will seem much more caring and approachable. The gift of seeing the world from a variety of perspectives is something you can use any time in any situation.

This Week’s Challenge:

- Talk to another person about what it is like to walk in their shoes—about their issues and concerns and how they perceived experiences you both shared.
- Ask better questions. Bring three or four thoughtful, even provocative questions to every conversation you have with clients or colleagues in the next few days.

Keep on Learning

- To gain a better perspective on empathy watch this short video from Brené Brown.  
- To learn more about improving and using your empathy skills, watch this Lynda.com Course: Extending Empathy.  
- You can find guidelines on being more empathetic in this Psychology Today blog post: How to Be Empathetic.