

Understanding the person behind the performance

A structure lens for fair, human-centred important performance reviews.



As the year comes to an end, people carry more cognitive load, pressure, and emotion than usual due to juggling deadlines, expectations, and personal commitments while reflecting on their performance and future.

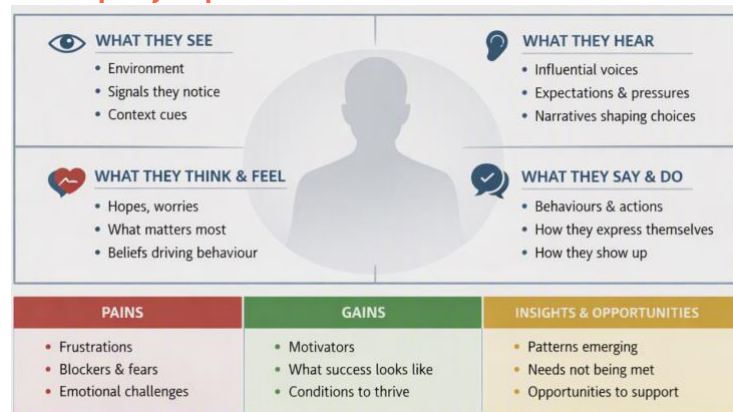
Performance reviews can feel very important and personal; they shape how people see their future, their value, and their relationship with their manager. This is why the quality of our conversations matters. A review isn't just a transfer of information; it's a moment of meaning. Empathy ensures the conversation is fair, human, compassionate, and constructive; not rushed, transactional, or unintentionally harmful.

This one-pager outlines how leaders can use empathy and a simple 'Empathy Map' to prepare for review conversations that maximise effectiveness and compassion.

Sympathy and Empathy

Sympathy and empathy are often confused, but they play very different roles in leadership. Sympathy is feeling *for* someone; a response of concern, sorrow, or pity when another person is experiencing something difficult. Empathy is understanding with someone; the ability to step into their perspective, appreciate their thoughts, emotions, pressures, and context, and connect with what their experience *feels like* for them, even if you don't share it. You can have one without the other, but reviews require empathy. Empathy improves psychological safety, reduces defensiveness, and increases openness. It helps leaders understand the *context* behind performance, not just the output. Most importantly, it strengthens trust and alignment for the future.

The Empathy Map



The Empathy Map is a simple, structured way to understand another person more fully.

The Empathy Map helps leaders prepare for reviews by exploring what someone sees, hears, thinks, feels, says, and does, revealing the pains, gains, and opportunities that shape their experience. By using the map, leaders develop a more rounded understanding of each individual, encouraging conversations that are fair, human, and forward-looking. It supports better decision-making around development, support, and expectations and ultimately helps build a culture where people feel seen, not judged.

“Empathy helps us see performance through the lens of experience.”

Before the review: Use the map to build a rounded picture of the person's context. Consider what they may be seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, saying, and doing and identify the pressures, influences, or circumstances that may be shaping their experience. Filling in the map beforehand helps you (as the leader) enter the conversation with greater clarity and empathy. It gives you the

opportunity to step into their shoes, see the situation from their perspective, and consider the wider context so you can offer feedback and direction in the most effective, supportive way

During the review: Listen for cues that confirm or challenge your assumptions. Treat the map as a working hypothesis, not a set of facts. Use open questions to explore their perspective, understand their context, and surface what matters most to them. Acknowledge what you hear, check your interpretations, and agree clear, realistic next steps. Remember that the real success lies in the preparation. The value comes from the time you invest beforehand to step into their shoes, understand their perspective, and build a thoughtful map that guides the conversation.

After the review: Reflect on the insights gained and identify opportunities to support growth. Record the support, expectations, and follow-up actions that were agreed. Use these insights to shape ongoing development, strengthen alignment, and ensure the person feels seen, understood, and supported beyond the review itself.

“Empathy raises understanding.”

Empathy does not mean lowering standards, avoiding difficult feedback, or excusing poor performance. It means understanding the full context, communicating expectations clearly, and agreeing support and accountability in a way that enables progress, and in a way that maximises the likelihood they can truly hear it, digest it, and change. Performance reviews are a powerful moment to reinforce empathy as a leadership behaviour, a way of showing fairness, clarity, and humanity even when conversations are challenging. The Empathy Map gives leaders a practical, repeatable way to do this, helping people feel seen, understood, and supported while maintaining high expectations and shared responsibility.

Take the opportunity from now on to make every performance review both rigorous and human. When leaders use empathy to guide their conversations, they create clarity, trust, and momentum, and set people up for a stronger year ahead. Empathy also reinforces psychological safety and models compassion — not as a way of sidestepping challenge, but as a way of holding tough conversations in a fair, respectful, and constructive manner.

For more information please visit structuredempathy.net