

PAS QUICKNOTES

This PAS QuickNotes was prepared by Meaghan McSorley, PhD, assistant professor of urban and regional planning at Florida State University.

Empathy in Planning

Empathy is a skill for sensing others' emotions and imagining their thoughts and feelings. In today's contentious and polarized world, being able to remain open and curious, bridge differences, and find common ground is vitally important for planners. Cultivating empathy and **building skills** for working with emotions can support not just your work with colleagues and community members, but also your personal well-being as a planner.

BACKGROUND

Empathy is part of **emotional intelligence**, a group of skills for perceiving, understanding, managing, and leveraging emotions in oneself and one's relationships. Much of the work of planning is about changing places and shaping the future—which can be an intensely emotional subject. Add to this the weight of historical relationships between governments and communities, and of power differentials today, and it is clear that even simple planning issues can become fraught with emotion. Yet, planners often feel they are supposed to be objective and rational, and they may not have training to manage strong emotions in themselves or others. The following strategies can help you develop skills in integrating empathy within your planning practice to avoid overwhelm and burnout.

USING EMPATHY TO SUPPORT PERSONAL WELL-BEING

Cultivating empathy to support your personal well-being is the first step towards having the mental space and capacity to practice having empathy for others. If you aren't able to notice emotions in yourself or offer yourself self-compassion, it is a lot more challenging to offer it to others.

Strategies to be more empathetic toward yourself include the following:

- **Be kind(er) to yourself every day.** Carve out time to meet your basic self-care needs (sleep, movement, eating, hydration). It's hard to be empathetic when you're tired or hungry! Talk to yourself internally like you would a friend. Even when we recognize that we have room to grow, it's important to approach that growth with **self-compassion** rather than self-shame.
- **Practice recognizing emotions in yourself.** Try to **identify and name your emotions** as you experience them. Acknowledging what we are feeling sounds simple but is both a skill that requires cultivation and a profound tool for reducing the intensity of the feeling. Journaling can help you work through complex personal and professional situations. Writing things down on paper can untangle multiple emotions and help you let go.
- **Ask for help and mentorship.** It's important to have friends and mentors with whom you can ideate, commiserate, and appreciate. If you are struggling with something, you probably know someone else who is struggling with it too. Asking for support can feel scary and vulnerable, but it can also create space to support one another's empathy journeys.

While it may seem counterintuitive to begin with yourself, these personal skills are essential for being able to look outwards to your other relationships from a calm, grounded place.

USING EMPATHY TO STRENGTHEN TEAMWORK

Empathy can be an important component in supporting and strengthening teamwork. Your colleagues are the people you spend the most time with, and building good working relationships is important for your workplace culture and everyone's well-being.



Cultivating empathy helps planners connect with colleagues and community members and supports personal well-being. (Credit: Jacob Wackerhausen/iStock/Getty Images Plus)



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Strategies to bring more empathy to teamwork include the following:

- **Focus on the shared goal.** If a team member does something that you can't understand or makes a mistake, remember that "we are all on the same team." Slowing down and focusing on the shared goal can open up space for curiosity and conversation, help you understand that person's thought process, and generate ideas on how to work together better to reach that goal.
- **Have regular check-ins.** Does your team have a regular time to discuss and balance workloads? Carving out a weekly or bi-weekly check-in for the whole team to come together and share progress, get feedback, and ask for help during busy times can normalize asking for help and make it easier for people to load balance when they have too much on their plate.
- **Ask for feedback and implement it.** Managers can create an inclusive and empathetic workplace by collecting and transparently addressing feedback on elements like workplace environment and individual management styles. This can identify opportunities for improvement and open conversation. Feedback can be collected formally (e.g., through anonymous surveys) and informally (e.g., in check-in meetings and conversations).

When people feel safe and happy, they do better work. These points are a few small steps towards creating an inclusive workplace.

USING EMPATHY TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Cultivating empathy is a vital component of a planner's work with the community. As Leslie Knope from *Parks and Recreation* says, "What I hear when I'm being yelled at is people caring loudly at me." Practicing empathy allows planners to build authentic relationships with community members and enables better understanding of communities' needs. Strategies for practicing empathy in communication include the following:

- **Practice noticing and naming emotions in others.** Is the person yelling at you experiencing fear, anger, frustration, anguish, etc.? Taking the time to identify what you think they might be experiencing can help you respond instead of reacting. Pay attention to their facial expressions and body language and consider how that feels in your own body.
- **Don't assume you know the whole story.** When we try to imagine what the other person is feeling, we must remember that just because we can imagine the emotion does not mean we understand their experience or wider context.
- **Slow down and practice curiosity.** Can you take a deep breath and get curious about where the other person is coming from? Acknowledge the strong feelings but remain calm and ask questions. Can you listen beyond the emotion to hear their underlying concerns and identify shared values?

Hearing community members from a place of compassion and empathy allows planners to better manage their own and others' emotions and move forward from conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

Empathy is a skill that can be cultivated. Taking time to learn how to practice self-compassion will enable you to extend your empathy to others from a calm, grounded place. Empathy alone is not sufficient to address issues of equity and justice, but it is one tool that we can use to move our workplaces and communities towards inclusivity while protecting and supporting our own and others' well-being.

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FURTHER READING

Published by the American Planning Association

Greene, Chloé, Jasmin Moore, Meaghan McSorley, and Ward Lyles, with Sagar Shah. 2024. *Empathy, Equity, and You: Stories, Skills, and Practices*. APA Passport.

Miller, Kyle. 2019. "Uncovering JAPA: Who Cares? Reimagining Planning as Caring." *APA Blog*, September 12.

Wendell, Corrin. 2023. "5 Ways Empathy Can Help You Be a Better Planner." *Planning*, September 7.

Other Resources

Feelingswheel.com. n.d. *Feelings Wheel*.

Greater Good Science Center. n.d. *Empathy*. University of California, Berkeley.

Neff, Kristin. n.d. *What is Self-Compassion?*