Tactical Empathy: Labelling and Mirroring

Tactical empathy is the skill of understanding what the other side feels and thinks, and then saying it out loud so that they feel heard. Chris Voss, a former FBI negotiator who handled kidnapping and hostage cases, explains it in his 2016 book Never Split the Difference, written with Tahl Raz. It does not mean agreeing or being soft. It is a practical way to lower tension and to learn what the other side really needs. Voss teaches three simple tools: mirroring, labelling and calibrated questions.

1. The Idea: Understand, Do Not Agree

Tactical empathy means understanding the other person's feelings and point of view, and showing that we understand. Understanding is not agreeing, because we can say that we see their concern and still keep our own position. When people feel heard, they usually become calmer and more willing to share information. That information is the real prize in a negotiation, because it shows what the other side needs.

Example: A shop assistant faces an angry customer. She applies the idea of understanding without agreeing: she says that waiting so long must have been frustrating, but she promises nothing yet. The customer calms down and explains what they really need.

At work: Karim, a buyer, hears a supplier say that the new price is final. He applies the idea of understanding without agreeing: he says that he understands why the supplier's costs are rising, but he does not accept the price. The supplier relaxes and starts to explain which costs worry him most.

2. Mirroring

Mirroring means repeating the last few words, or the key words, of what the other person just said, in a calm and curious tone. Voss suggests using only one to three words, and then staying quiet. The pause invites the other person to explain more, so we learn details without asking a direct question. It works best when it is used gently and not too often.

Example: A friend says that they are tired of this job. We use mirroring and repeat the last words, of this job, in a curious tone. The friend explains that the real problem is the new manager.

At work: The supplier insists that the price is final. Karim uses mirroring and repeats just one word, final, in a curious tone, and then he waits. After a pause, the supplier admits that the price is fixed only for small orders.

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3. Labelling

Labelling means naming the emotion we notice, with a soft opening such as it seems like, it sounds like or it looks like. Voss advises avoiding the word I, because it sounds like a personal judgement. After the label, we stay silent and let the other person respond. A correct label makes people feel understood, and a wrong one is easy to correct and still teaches us something. Voss also suggests naming negative feelings openly, because this often reduces their power.

Example: A teenager slams the door after a bad day. A parent uses labelling and says gently that it seems like today was really frustrating. The teenager sighs and begins to talk about what happened.

At work: After the supplier explains his costs, Karim uses labelling and says that it sounds like the supplier is worried about his profit margin. The supplier answers that this is exactly what worries him, and Karim now knows what to address.

4. Calibrated Questions

Calibrated questions are open questions that begin with what or how. They cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, so the other person has to think and explain. Voss advises avoiding why, because it can sound like an accusation and make people defensive. These questions let the other side feel in control, while we guide the talk toward the problem we want to solve together.

Example: A customer asks for a refund after the return period. The shop assistant uses a calibrated question and asks what would work for both sides. The customer suggests store credit, and both are satisfied.

At work: Karim uses a calibrated question: how can we make this price work for both of us? The supplier proposes a larger order with a small discount and a longer payment period.

Conclusion

In summary, tactical empathy means understanding what the other side feels and showing it, without necessarily agreeing. Chris Voss offers three simple tools for this: mirroring, labelling and calibrated questions. We mirror to invite more detail, we label to name the emotion, and we ask what or how questions to solve the problem together. Used with care, these tools lower tension and reveal what the other side really needs.

Sources

- Voss, C. with Raz, T. (2016). Never Split the Difference: Negotiating As If Your Life Depended On It. Harper Business (the source of mirroring, labelling and calibrated questions).
- The Black Swan Group: negotiation training founded by Chris Voss – https://www.blackswanltd.com/
- Harvard Program on Negotiation: Empathy in negotiation (articles) – https://www.pon.harvard.edu/tag/empathy/

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