Empathy is about rapport and openness between people. When it is absent, people are less likely to consider your needs and feelings. The best way to build empathy is to help the other person feel that they are understood. That means being an active listener. There are specific listening activities relevant to different situations - information, affirmation or inflammation.

1. INFORMATION - getting a clear picture

AIM OF SPEAKER: to get across what is wanted so there is no confusion.
TASK OF LISTENER: to get the details, to check out and confirm what they are saying and what they are forgetting to say.
Here you are trying to find out about needs, instructions, background information.
ASK QUESTIONS - Find out about needs, instructions, context, timing, costs etc.
CHECK BACK - to be sure you have heard and understood the relevant details.
SUMMARISE - to make sure you both agree on the facts.
To get a "Yes, that's what I want" so you are both clear.

Don't jump straight into solutions.
Collect information.
Find out how it is on the other side first.

- Enquire about their needs in the situation.
- Enquire about their concerns, anxieties or difficulties.
- Find out their view of the needs and concerns of other relevant people affecting the situation.
- Ask general questions that encourage them to open up e.g. How do you see it all?
- Ask specific questions that will give you significant pieces of information e.g. How much does it cost?
- Explore hidden premises on which they build their thinking.

If they say "I can't" you might ask "What happens if you do?"
If they say "They always..." you might ask "Are there any circumstances in which they don't?"
If they say "It's too many, or too much" or "It's too little or too few" you might ask "compared with what?"

2. AFFIRMATION - affirming, acknowledging, exploring the problem.

AIM OF SPEAKER: to talk about the problem.
TASK OF LISTENER: to acknowledge their feelings, to help them hear what they are saying.

Source: http://www.crnhq.org/windskill3.html
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saying. Here you are recognising that the other person would be helped by you taking time to hear their problem. 
LISTEN - attentively to the other person who will benefit from having their problem acknowledged by you. 
REFLECT BACK - to the other person their feelings, and perhaps the content of the problem with a single statement of acknowledgement periodically. 
EXPLORE - to unfold the difficulty in more depth. If time permits, assist the speaker in finding greater clarity and understanding for themselves. 
To get a "Yes, that's what I feel" so they explore what they are saying and they know they've been understood.

Use Active Listening when offering advice won't help. 
Active Listening builds relationship.

- Don't ignore or deny their feelings. 
- Read the non-verbal as well as the verbal communication to assess feelings. 
- Check back with them about their feelings as well as the content even though they may only be telling you about the content. 
- If you're not sure how they feel, ask them e.g. "How do you feel about that?", "How did that affect you?" 
- Reflect back to them what you hear them to be saying so they can hear themselves. 
- Reflect back to them what you hear them to be saying so they know you understand. 
- If you get it wrong, ask an open question and try again e.g. "How do you see the situation?"

When time permits: direct the conversation back to the point if the person drifts to a less significant topic because they feel you don't understand. 
Allow silences in the conversation. 
Remember that your active listening is a method of helping the other person focus below the words to the unresolved issues. 
Notice sighs and body shifts. They usually indicate insight or acceptance. Pause before asking something like "How does it all seem to you now?"

3. INFLAMMATION - responding to a complaint or attack on you

AIM OF SPEAKER: to tell you that you are the problem. 
TASK OF LISTENER: to let them know you've taken in what they are saying and to defuse the strong emotion. 
Here you are choosing the most useful response when someone is telling you they are unhappy with you, criticising you, complaining about you, or just simply yelling. 
DON'T DEFEND yourself at this point. It will inflame them further.

EMPATHY

DON'T DEFEND yourself at this point. It will inflame them further.
DEAL FIRST WITH THEIR EMOTIONS - People shout because they don't think they are being heard. Make sure they know they are - that you are hearing how angry or upset they are. Label accurately the emotions/feelings as you perceive them.
ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR SIDE - This does not mean you agree with them, only that you are registering their viewpoint e.g. "I can see, if you think that was my attitude, why you are so angry", "I can see why the problem makes you so upset".
Draw them out further. Explore gently with them if there is more behind the emotion.
Once the heat is out of the conversation, you might say how it is for you without denying how it is for them.
Ask what could be done now to make it OK again. If they heat up again, go back to Active Listening.
Move towards options for change or solution. Ask what they really want, or what they want now.
To get a "Yes, that's what I said" so that they know you have taken in what they said.

For them to change first I must change.

- One of the first things I might need to change is my approach.
- Don't rise to the bait, and retaliate.
- Don't start justifying.
- Don't act defensive.
- Go into Active Listening mode and stay there till they've calmed down.
- Use phrases like "It's making you really mad", "I can see how upset you are", "You feel like you've reached your limit", "Have I got it right?", "So when I do... you get really frustrated with me."

Keep on reflecting back as accurately as you can until they come down from the high emotion. If you are doing it right, they will explain everything in some detail, but as the interchange continues the heat should be going out of the conversation.