

What's Empathy Got to Do With It?

Bruna Martinuzzi, adapted from her book: *The Leader as a Mensch: Become the Kind of Person Others Want to Follow*

A few weeks ago, I came across a bumper sticker that said: "I am not good at empathy. Will you settle for sarcasm?" The humor in the bumper sticker led me to think of the slight unease or self-conscious discomfort that many people feel when a term such as "empathy" is introduced in a business environment. Notions of "touchy-feely," spring to mind.

While empathy is a right brain activity, it is far from being a touchy-feely topic. At its core, empathy is the oil that keeps relationships running smoothly. The fact that empathy is an important component of effective relationships has been proven: In studies by Dr Antonio Damasio (outlined in his book: "[Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain](#)"), medical patients who had damage to part of the brain associated with empathy showed significant deficits in relationship skills, even though their reasoning and learning abilities remained intact.

Indeed, empathy is valued currency. It allows us to create bonds of trust, it gives us insights into what others may be feeling or thinking; it helps us understand how or why others are reacting to situations, it sharpens our "people acumen" and it informs our decisions.

A formal definition of Empathy is the ability to identify and understand another's situation, feelings and motives. It's our capacity to recognize the concerns other people have. Empathy means: "putting yourself in the other person's shoes" or "seeing things through someone else's eyes."

There are numerous studies that link empathy to business results. They include studies that correlate empathy with increased

sales, with the performance of the best managers of product development teams and with enhanced performance in an increasingly diverse workforce. A few of these studies can be viewed on the site of [The Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations](#).

Yes, increasingly, the topic of empathy is encroaching on the business world. We are now even seeing terms such as "empathy marketing" and "empathy selling." Not long ago, I came across the term "user empathy," referring to user interface. Along those lines, in his book, [A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age](#), Daniel Pink predicts that power will reside with those who have strong right-brain (interpersonal) qualities. He cites three forces that are causing this change: Abundance, Asia, and Automation. "Abundance" refers to our increasing demand for products or services that are aesthetically pleasing; "Asia" refers to the growing trend of outsourcing; "Automation" is self-explanatory. In order to compete in the new economy market, Pink suggests six areas that are vital to our success. One of which is Empathy; the ability to imagine yourself in someone else's position, to imagine what they are feeling, to understand what makes people tick, to create relationships and to be caring of others: All of which is very difficult to outsource or automate, and yet is increasingly important to business.

Empathy is also particularly critical to leadership development in this age of young, independent, highly marketable and mobile workers. In a popular Harvard Business Review article entitled "[What Makes a Leader?](#)", Dr Daniel Goleman isolates three reasons why empathy is so important: the increasing use of teams, (which he refers to as "cauldrons of bubbling emotions"), the rapid pace of globalization (with cross cultural communication easily leading to misunderstandings) and the growing need to retain talent.

"Leaders with empathy," states Goleman, "do more than sympathize with people around them: they use their knowledge to improve their companies in subtle, but important ways." This doesn't mean that they agree with everyone's view or try to please everybody. Rather, they "thoughtfully consider employees' feelings – along with other factors – in the process of making intelligent decisions."

Empathy, then, is an ability that is well-worth cultivating. It's a soft, sometimes abstract tool in a leader's toolkit that can lead to hard, tangible results. But where does empathy come from? Is it a process of thinking or of emotion? From my perspective, I believe that it is both: We need to use our reasoning ability to understand another person's thoughts, feelings, reactions, concerns, motives. This means truly making an effort to stop and think for a moment about the other person's perspective in order to begin to understand where they are coming from: And then we need the emotional capacity to care for that person's concern; Caring does not mean that we would always agree with the person, that we would change our position, but it does mean that we would be in tune with what that person is going through, so that we can respond in a manner that acknowledges their thoughts, feelings or concerns.

So this leads me to a question that I am sometimes asked: "Can you teach someone to be empathetic?" We all know some people who are naturally and consistently empathetic – these are the people who can easily forge positive connections with others. They are people who use empathy to engender trust and build bonds; they are catalysts who are able to create positive communities for the greater good. But even if empathy does not come naturally to some of us, I firmly believe that we can develop this capacity.

Here are a few practical tips you might consider to help you do this:

1. Listen – truly listen to people. Listen with your ears, eyes and heart. Pay attention to others' body language, to their tone of voice, to the hidden emotions behind what they are saying to you, and to the context.
2. Don't interrupt people. Don't dismiss their concerns offhand. Don't rush to give advice. Don't change the subject. Allow people their moment.
3. Tune in to non-verbal communication. This is the way that people often communicate what they think or feel, even when their verbal communication says something quite different.
4. Practice the "93 percent rule". We know from a famous study by Professor Emeritus, Albert Mehrabian of UCLA, when communicating about feelings and attitudes, words – the things we say – account for only 7 percent of the total message that people receive. The other 93 percent of the message that we communicate when we speak is contained in our tone of voice and body language. It's important, then, to spend some time to understand how we come across when we communicate with others about our feelings and attitudes.
5. Use people's name. Also remember the names of people's spouse and children so that you can refer to them by name.
6. Be fully present when you are with people. Don't check your email, look at your watch or take phone calls when a direct report drops into your office to talk to you. Put yourself in their shoes. How would you feel if your boss did that to you?
7. Smile at people.
8. Encourage people, particularly the quiet ones, when they

Speak up in meetings. A simple thing like an attentive nod can boost people's confidence.

9. Give genuine recognition and praise. Pay attention to what people are doing and catch them doing the right things. When you give praise, spend a little effort to make your genuine words memorable: "You are an asset to this team because..."; "This was pure genius"; "I would have missed this if you hadn't picked it up."
10. Take a personal interest in people. Show people that you care, and genuine curiosity about their lives. Ask them questions about their hobbies, their challenges, their families, their aspirations.

Empathy is an emotional and thinking muscle that becomes stronger the more we use it. Try some of these suggestions and watch the reactions of those you work with. I believe you will notice some positive results.

Years ago, I had come across a saying that went something like this: the measure of a man [or woman], is how they treat someone who is of absolutely no use to them. Empathy should not be selective: It should be a daily habit. If I were to create a bumper sticker, I would say: "Empathy: Don't Leave Home Without It!"

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This article is adapted from Bruna Martinuzzi's book: [The Leader as a Mensch: Become the Kind of Person Others Want to Follow](#). Bruna is an educator, author, speaker and founder of [Clarion Enterprises Ltd](#), a company which specializes in emotional intelligence, leadership, Myers-Briggs and presentation skills training. [Click here to contact her](#) or visit her website at www.increaseyoureq.com. [Click here](#) for other articles by Bruna.

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