

Personal Excellence

Part of Your Plan and Performance System

ESSENTIALS

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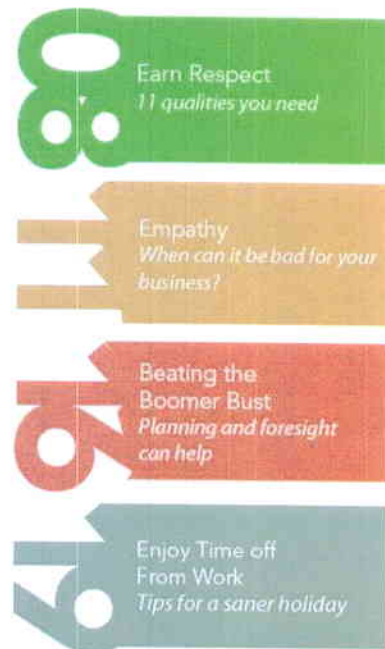
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Empathy

When can it be bad for your business?

By Dianna Booher

Have you ever stood in an airport terminal and watched soldiers give their toddlers one last bear hug before leaving for war? If you've felt yourself choke up, that's empathy. If you've ever listened to someone on TV, pleading with a crazed killer holding a family member hostage and felt tension throughout your body, that's empathy.

The ability to feel and understand another person's experiences builds a connection. When you have that sincere connection, others recognize it in your face, voice, and gestures. When in that state, you have opportunity to influence others because they know you have their best interest in mind.



Those in the HR business are known for their empathy—that special sensitivity and connection. That's why when employees experience difficulty with a boss or coworker or personal disasters of almost any nature, they head for your door.

But empathy *doesn't* necessarily mean that you can influence someone for the long-term and lead them to the best outcome. Nor does having empathy mean you even know what the best outcome might be—for them or for you and your business.

In fact, research studies done at Northwestern University, INSEAD, Saint Mary's University, and Dartmouth College suggest that it's better to get inside someone's head than inside their heart. Perspective-taking will make you more persuasive and a better negotiator than empathy will.

Consider why that might be: Empathetic people may become ruled—and thereby limited—by their emotions. They find it dif-

ficult to step outside their biased views. So they often go beyond the “norms” of what's fair to give preferential treatment to someone they feel compassion for—even giving up their own rights and goals.

You've seen situations like this yourself: An employer gives a poor performer a third, fourth, fifth, and even more chances to change a bad attitude simply because the boss feels empathy for the employee. And in the meantime, the poor-performing employee may destroy the morale and productivity of everyone in the department. Clearly, the boss does not have the best perspective in this situation—that is, the best perspective to influence the poor performer to change his behavior for the good of the entire department.

A sales rep with empathy but limited perspective finds herself identifying with every difficult situation clients tell her. All too frequently, she takes advantages of the flexibility her manager has given her in quoting pricing for large bulk orders and often gives away much of her company's profit margin.

The person with perspective has self-confidence. They are not seeking approval from others. They do not look at situations necessarily for how things affect them personally. Their attempt to pause and take perspective doesn't mean that they don't have biases. Rather, it means that they *know* they have biases, but they don't let those biases limit them. They can step outside those biases and take an objective look at what's fair and reasonable in various situations.

For example, consider coaches (or fans, for that matter) at a sporting event. Let's say Team A has an empathetic coach. If the referee makes a few bad calls that result in his team falling behind, the coach may begin to empathize with his players. He may encourage them to “get even” and do whatever it takes as long as they don't get a penalty. He and the team may get angrier as they fall further behind. At the third bad call by the referees, the players become more demoralized. The coach curses the official and gets thrown out of the game, earning another penalty. They eventually lose the game.

By contrast, the coach for Team B has the ability to take perspective in a game with inexperienced officials making bad calls; he can step outside his emotional upset and assess the situation. While he may also empathize with his players, he takes perspective: *The game is not rigged. This is college sports. These are simply inexperienced officials. What my players need now is something to reduce the frustration of bad officiating. I'll refocus them on executing plays with precision just like we do in practice.* The coach with this perspective has a much stronger chance of influencing toward a better outcome for all concerned.

So what's the key to perspective in your business and in your personal life?

Listening. Evaluating. Assessing.

Empathy builds relationships. Perspective keeps them humming. **PE**



Dianna Booher, MA, CPAE, an expert in executive communications, is the author of 46 books, published in 26 languages, with nearly 4 million copies sold. Her latest book, *What More Can I Say: Why Communication Fails and What to Do About It*, is available at local and online bookstores. Call 817-283-2333. Visit www.boohar.com.

