

Management and Performance Associates – November 2014 The Era of Empathy

Over the last couple decades, looking at IQ as the *only* factor for determining success in the corporate world has been thrown into question. During that same time period, we've seen the rise of "EQ," or emotional intelligence to explain success in business. EQ is the competence of noticing, controlling, assessing and expressing emotions.

Dr. Bernice Ledbetter supported this position by writing an article this month which was picked up by the Huffington Post titled "6 Leadership Myths and Realities." One of the myths she listed was "Great leaders keep their emotions in check." She continued "Great leaders connect to others on a human level, and that requires using emotions such as empathy, compassion and happiness..."

In any organization, people are constantly dealing with emotions; sometimes their own, sometimes others'. Many people try to leave their emotions at home, or keep them separate from work, which isn't realistic. Effective leaders recognize that their staff members and peers—as well as themselves—are people who have feelings and have personal issues.

Empathy is therefore the power to understand and connect with others' feelings.

The definition is not limited to the above. It also helps to be a better innovator, create a better service, and have a better quality of life. True empathy combines understanding emotions as well as the ideas presented by others.

Let's look at an example. In 1979, Patricia Moore was attending a team meeting at a design company she worked for in New York. She asked if she could design a refrigerator

door that could be easily opened by someone with arthritis. A senior colleague replied that they didn't design for "those people." Because of this, she was motivated to start an experiment where, while prosthetically disguised as an 80 year old, she visited 116 cities in the US and Canada. Her purpose was to understand the obstacles that the elderly face when managing their daily lives. Her findings took international design in a radical new direction. One example of Patricia's work is soft touch scissors and other kitchen utensils with larger, rubber handles making it possible for people with arthritis to hold them comfortably.

Leaders can, and should, empathize with others. Although we do not normally associate empathy with corporate life, research demonstrates that the most effective managers are the ones who are truly interested in the people they work with. They inspire and attract people.

Research conducted by The Hay Group has identified six leadership styles. Each of them can be effective, or not, depending on whether they are used at the right time, with the right people, and for the right length of time. Four of them are considered empathetic and produce positive organizational climate results. A leader with empathy has more tools to connect with others and understand their point of view.

Although it's extremely easy to isolate yourself and have earbuds in your ears, it's worthwhile to remember that we are not alone and cannot act without other people.

Everybody needs support from other people to obtain results and drive the corporate vision.

Developing empathy is not easy. The following three simple exercises may help to put you on the right track:

A- ACTIVELY LISTEN to the verbal and non-verbal language of the other party, especially if they are different from you. **AVOID acting based on first impressions.** In general, we don't see the other person—we only see what our biases make of him/her. Listen with the intent of understanding, not with the intent of responding to what has been said.

B- CHANGE your mindset and consider that, in a disagreement, there is a chance **you** are at fault. At least, think about it. There is nothing wrong if you're the one with the wrong perspective. As long as you admit it.

C- DON'T BE AFRAID of differences. It's only different, not bad. Allow yourself the opportunity to see life with a different perspective, even if only for a few minutes. Nobody is asking **you** to be different.

We invite those who feel that showing emotions—especially those in the corporate world—is a sign of weakness, to reconsider their beliefs. We're never going to be able to deliver good service or products if we've never been able to think empathetically. We won't be able to negotiate or conduct a coaching session. Without empathy it's impossible to understand the needs, thoughts or wishes of others.

For more on the subject, please check out the following 3-minute animation video: <http://youtu.be/AiZt7Gc0oMo>

The video is narrated by Brené Brown, author of *How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. It explains the difference between empathy and sympathy. Showing sympathy creates distance because people don't feel understood or that the "listener" cares about their situation. On the other hand, when you show empathy you're connecting with the other person. They feel listened to and understood. Even if you don't reach the problem solving stage you're creating a basis for a solid relationship.

In closing, more evidence. In her July 2014 article for Harvard Business Review titled *Management's Three Eras: A Brief History*, Rita McGrath argues that after going through The Execution and Expertise eras, management has entered the Era of Empathy. What about you? In which era do you live?

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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