

The Business Case For Empathy

Empathy is the ability to view the world from another person's point of view and fully comprehend their feelings without judgement. Whenever empathy is present in a conversation, the other person feels understood, appreciated, and valued for who they are. What we receive in return from others can be largely influenced by the empathy they experience from us.

Empathy is a great catalyst for problem solving. Often, when empathy is being authentically exercised, at one point in the conversation the other person starts to realize solutions to their problems. Ideas that were not previously available to them start to immerge. This is because as we intently listen, they manage to articulate and express their thoughts and feelings in words. In doing so, their problems become more objective and clear, allowing them to figure out practical and logical ways to resolve them. Since it is you who provided them with a safe and non-judgemental medium to freely run their thoughts, express their feelings and generate solutions, their trust in you grows exponentially.

Many of us have experienced the virtues of empathy at certain points in our lives. Whether it is that school teacher, college professor, boss, a parent or a friend, that person seemed to always fully understand you and you always left the conversation in a better state.

Empathy can be learnt. It requires us to momentarily put aside our thoughts, opinions and judgements; offer intent and undivided listening; and engage others with interest and curiosity. The objective of the conversation is not to solve problems or offer comfort, but rather to insure that the other person is being heard.

To exercise empathy towards other people requires that we exercise it on ourselves first. Being aware of our thoughts and emotions enables us to set aside our opinions and judgements while we're actively listening to others. It is only when we're able to engage with mere interest and curiosity do we generate a safe environment for others to experience empathy. It is an ongoing effort that requires constant self-awareness while simultaneously being completely attentive to every word and expression

communicated by other people. This sounds like a lot of work, and it is, but the rewards are well worth it.

So how can we put aside our judgements and opinions? As human beings at times we tend to see or hear the same things and interpret them differently. Factors like upbringing, education, peer influence, values, priorities, current circumstances, future desires can influence the way we operate throughout our lives. A space of empathy requires us to become conscious of the way we operate and the limitations thereof. With this knowledge we have better chances to suspend our judgements, withhold our opinion and provide attentive listening.

One of the main elements that prevent many people from exercising empathy is time. We might often feel that it is best to invest this precious time in other "more important" tasks rather than sit, focus and listen. Those who have exercised empathy and experienced the enhanced performance in their teams consider the time they spend listening as an investment with high returns both on business as well as personal levels.

Consistently providing empathy in communication is another challenge. With everyday life demands and ever-changing circumstances, we can find ourselves caught in vicious cycles of fire fighting and reactiveness. We become one with our judgements and our decisions become sourced from within the limitations of our interpretations. Communication becomes deprived of empathy and people might feel alienated as a result.

Therefore, it is vital that we find venues that help generate a safe environment for us to self-reflect, discover more options for engagement, and be better prepared to provide empathy in upcoming conversations. There is a wide range of such venues, from meditation to third party facilitation. Different people and different circumstances require different venues. It might take some search to find what works best. Whatever the venue is, with empathy productivity is harnessed with joy, not at the cost of it.

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