Exercise Your Empathy

As a kid, you're often asked the cliché question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" When I chose my college degree as a legal "adult" at age 18, I still had no idea how to answer that question. While that's not a unique situation, my solution was to get a degree in what I believed applied to everything: Psychology.

Understanding why people think, feel, and behave the way they do is advantageous to both personal and professional life. Communication is the foundation of human existence, and empathy is a powerful tool in effectively communicating with others. Empathy, by definition, is the ability to understand and *share* the feelings of another. While the definition may seem straightforward, it's a complex concept.

What comes to mind when you think of empathy? You might first think of listening to a friend vent, being open-minded to a differing opinion, or donating to a meaningful cause. Does business come to mind?

Empathy in the workplace could be the key to your success.

How does empathy apply to business?

- You'll create useful designs

    - Having the ability to tap in and conceptualize what others might think or feel when using a product could give you powerful insight in designing the product

    - Shift your mentality to the experience you want to create for the customer

- You'll be able to anticipate the needs of your customers

    - Customer service is a huge differentiator when it comes to service providers, and empathy makes all the difference

    - Having an empathy-driven approach can not only ensure you have satisfied customers when trouble-shooting their problems, but also enable you to anticipate their needs and prevent a problem from arising

- You'll more effectively convince others of your perspective and ideas

    - Whether selling to a potential buyer, marketing a product, or working on a collaborative project, persuasion is essential

    - Considering how the target audience feels allows you to focus on the human element of your messaging and cater to their pain points

- You'll motivate your team

    - Empathy in leadership empowers your team, making them feel heard, appreciated, and important

- o This can increase metrics such as engagement, retention, innovation, and inclusivity

Most people are capable of empathy, but it's like a muscle that needs to be worked out. The first step is recognizing and admitting you have personal bias. These biases can hinder you from being in tune with a different perspective. Deliberately practicing empathy over time will make it intuitive. Train your team on empathy!

Tips to become more empathetic

- Read fiction

  - o Reading literary fiction is an immersive experience where you get the unusual opportunity to see events unfold from someone else's perspective

  - o This enables you to identify with people outside of yourself and give you a window into the inner thoughts of another, helping you to understand and even personally feel their emotions

- Ask questions and listen with intention

  - o Be curious and ask questions; give yourself the chance to learn about a person and get actual answers to your questions rather than making assumptions

  - o Intentional listening involves focusing completely on the speaker's words and body language without interruption or judgment to fully consider not just what they say, but what they mean

- Broaden your horizons

  - o Talk to strangers, attend cultural events, go to different places of worship

  - o It's easier to empathize with your ingroup and the people you have similarities with, but personal growth comes from being able to do this with people you differ from

The world feels more and more divided these days. If we all took the time to practice empathy, maybe we could change the world. Become a better leader, worker, friend, family member, and overall, person. If you're looking for a New Year's Resolution, make empathy your goal. You just might find it leads to many accomplishments.

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