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Business Success: I feel for you

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*Many of you who know me are aware that my 12-year old son is autistic. One aspect of autism is a lack of empathy: the inability to put yourself in another person's shoes, and understand their perspectives and how they feel. I never fully grasped just how important the ability to empathize with others is, before having a child who cannot do it. Empathy is critical to personal relationships; but it is just as important in the business world. In this week's Business Success column, **Marie Peeler**, principal of executive leadership firm Peeler Associates, explains why.*

Empathy: A powerful tool for leaders

People – and your relationships with people – are the lifeblood of your business. Customers, prospects, employees, and even suppliers are people that you need in order for your business to thrive.

Keeping them happy is important to your business. So are understanding their needs, garnering their loyalty, and gaining their cooperation.

Nothing can help you do all this better than developing empathy.

Developing empathy helps develop your business

Empathy is the ability to sense and understand the feelings of others. When you understand others' frustrations, their needs, and the way they think, you increase your connection to them and you gain an understanding of many things that are important to your business.

Empathy allows us to gain competitive intelligence. By putting ourselves into the shoes of customers and listening to what they feel, we begin to gain an understanding of how to design products and services that better meet their needs.

For example, one business owner named Jason, who was running into price resistance, started trying to understand more about what customers were really looking for and what they were willing to spend. He learned that some customers didn't really need all the features that his products included, and only felt they could afford what they needed. By showing genuine empathy for his customers' needs and budgets, he was able to redesign a product that was less expensive to produce but which met his customers' needs at a price they felt they could afford. At the same time, he increased sales for his business.

Conversely, many businesses have found that clients are willing to pay significantly more when a project or service provides the experience that captivates them. Making such discoveries starts with listening to customers – both what they say and what they don't say.

There are also clear advantages to demonstrating empathy with our employees. Earlier in my career, I sensed that a strong employee was somehow feeling restless. To follow up my suspicion, I asked him to meet with me and I shared my concern openly. It turned out that I was right. He was concerned about his future and wanted to advance but did not see opportunities where he was.

We had a frank conversation and I listened to his concerns. While I knew that we were looking to start a new product line and I'd hoped to tap into him to run the new business, the information was still confidential. But because I listened to him, he trusted me when I assured him that I empathized with his feelings and expected him to have a bright future with the company. He turned down a competitor's offer and stayed with us. Several months later we did indeed ask him to run the new business.



Highly empathic leaders build connections with others which in turn elicit loyalty and cooperation. People, whether they be clients, employees, or suppliers are simply more inclined to help other people that they sense are empathic to their needs and concerns.

According to the results of a study, doctors whose patients perceived them to be empathic were far less likely to be sued, even when they clearly made mistakes, than doctors who were not perceived to be empathic by their patients. Another study showed that doctors who simply apologized for errors avoided litigation.

This seems a little surprising until you think about it. We all want to be treated well and part of how we define being treated well is being treated with empathy. We form a connection with people who show empathy and we perceive them as fellow humans. We all seem to accept that humans do, unfortunately, make mistakes.

How to develop empathy

Cultivate powerful listening skills. All understanding begins with listening. Put down things that you were working on when you are listening and show that you are listening. Reflecting back what you are hearing will show that you genuinely care about understanding. Even if you get it wrong and the person has to correct you, they will appreciate that you are attempting to understand.

Suspend judgment. Real listening for understanding is impossible when you are engaged in judging or your view is clouded by your own beliefs. Instead, simply suspend judgments, try to put your own beliefs on hold. Take in what you are hearing and seek to understand it as the speaker's point of view.

Ask genuine questions. Questions play a valuable role in increasing our understanding by clarifying facts and others' points of view. But questions have to be real questions, not fake or rhetorical ones. "You're not really going to use that camera, are you?" isn't so much of a question as it is an obvious statement of the speaker's disagreement.

Marilee Adams, the author of *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* calls real questions that we ask in order to enhance our understanding "Learning Questions." She refers to the other type of question as "Judging Questions" because when we ask them, we are usually expressing a judgment, rather than making a sincere attempt to gain knowledge.

Practice telling a "story" from the point of view of a person you disagree with. Sarah Cook, Steve Macaulay, and Hilary Coldicott, authors of the book *Change Management Excellence*, describe a powerful exercise that involves reimagining the point of view of a person that you have some difficulty with.

Working with a neutral partner, first talk from your own point of view about the difficulty that you are having with the person with which you disagree. Then switch – literally, to a different chair – and talk about the difficulty from the other person's point of view. Finally, tell the story a third time from the neutral point of view of an outside observer and then step back into your own shoes to see what insights you have gained and what new options have opened up for seeing things differently.

There's no downside.

Sometimes leaders think that there is danger in being empathic; that understanding the feelings of others will make them seem weak or lead them to make illogical decisions that are not in the best interest of the business.

In reality, just the opposite occurs. Empathy is a powerful tool that helps leaders gain information and establish respect for other points of view. But once we understand how others feel, we are not compelled to agree with them. Armed with knowledge and understanding, we are free to make informed decisions.