

LEADING WITH EMPATHY

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DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING, CARE AND COMPASSION FOR CUSTOMERS AND EMPLOYEES.

BY SUSAN HASH, CONTACT CENTER PIPELINE



Everyone could use a little more empathy these days. The desire to feel heard and understood is a basic human need, and one that has a proven impact for companies. Numerous studies have linked empathy in the workplace to increased revenue and higher employee and customer satisfaction.

It's no surprise then that the demand for empathy in the business world has been on the rise. Consumers increasingly patronize the brands that practice volunteerism and demonstrate compassion for their employees, communities, social causes and environmental issues. Within the workplace, employee loyalty and retention is highest at companies where leaders regularly demonstrate that they put the needs and well-being of their employees first.

And yet, the current "selfie culture" has been weakening this core skill in younger generations. Children who spend much of their time plugged into self-focused media are less likely to learn how to read the emotional cues associated with face-to-face communication.

As **JIM REMBACH**, President of the [Call Center Coach](#) Virtual Leadership Academy and host of the [Fast Leader Show](#) Podcast,



explains, empathy has been steadily declining for decades. "Empathy is but one of the 54 emotional intelligence (EI) competencies you need to improve your EI. But it gets most of the attention because the skills have been decreasing with each passing generation," he says. "During her guest appearance on the Fast Leader Show Podcast, Michele Borba, educational psychologist and author of 'UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed In Our All-About-Me World,' shared that, over the past 30 years, there has been a 40% drop in empathy among incoming college freshman."

This year, COVID-19 and pandemic-related anxiety has thrust empathy into the spotlight as a high-demand skill required at all levels of the company. The challenge, though, is that executives and employees

view how empathy is demonstrated in the workplace through very different lenses. In fact, there currently exists a significant and widening gap in opinions when it comes to how well organizations demonstrate empathy. According to the "2020 State of Empathy in the Workplace" study by Businessolver, 90% of CEOs said they believe that their organization is empathetic while only 68% of employees agree (a 10-point decline over the previous two years).

Clearly, executives and employees have different workplace goals and objectives, which influences how they define the benefits associated with an empathetic company culture. The study points out that CEOs see empathy as a path to improved financial performance, while employees say it drives their individual motivation and productivity.

A first step in narrowing this perception gap may be to clear up existing misperceptions about what, exactly, empathy is, since it has become a marketing buzzword, says **SANGEETA BHATNAGAR**, Founder of contact center and CX talent acquisition

firm [SB Global](#), which specializes in EI and human behavior assessments. “According to



a leader in the study of EI and empathy, Daniel Goldman, there are three types of empathy: cognitive, emotional and empathic concern,” which Goldman defines as:

- Cognitive: We understand the perspectives of others.
- Emotional: We understand how others feel.
- Empathic concern: We care about others and take action to help them if needed.

Applying Empathy to Stakeholder Relationships

Empathy has varying impacts depending on the type of relationship. So how can it be applied to key stakeholder relationships within an organization?

“How and why people feel the way they do is very complicated. It gets even more problematic when viewed across your entire ecosystem,” says Rembach, who is a Certified Emotional Intelligence Practitioner. “You need to take a big-picture view to reduce conflict, increase first-contact resolution, reduce escalations, have collaborative relationships, and get more done faster.”

Let’s take a look at how to apply empathy within three key relationships: brands to customers; company leaders to employees; and supervisors to team members.

BRANDS TO CUSTOMERS

Customer experience professionals have long been leading the charge to engage with customers at every touchpoint and via multiple channels. This year, COVID-19 has made the effort to understand customers’ emotions, fears and pain points even more critical, albeit uniquely challenging.



“Even though we’re about eight months into the pandemic, it still has a firm grip on our everyday lives,” says **NANCY PORTE**, Vice President of Global Customer Experience for [Verint](#). “It’s no surprise

that Americans are suffering from COVID-19 fatigue, which is impacting consumer behavior. From travel to healthcare to banking and

Why Empathy in Leadership Matters

BY MARK PEREIRA

A 2019 study conducted by Businessolver shows that, although 80% of employees believe that organizations need to be more empathetic, only 57% of CEOs believe empathy is essential to their success.

As you can see, there’s a big gap.

Maybe you aren’t aware of how reliable this quality is. Can you recall a time when you’ve gone up to someone, perhaps your director, supervisor or team lead? You tell them the issue, pour out your heart, and their response is somewhere along the lines of, “I don’t care,” “get it done,” or even worse, “go away!” The same study also shows that 82% of employees would leave their jobs for an organization that displays more empathy toward their needs.

Still not convinced? Let me tell you a story about empathy in leadership and its outcomes.

A team member is screaming into her cellphone in the hallway, then runs back into the office, grabs her belongings and takes off. This is not the first time this has happened—and each time, the unplanned absence places additional strain on our call center to meet our service level agreement.

Through the grapevine, I heard and later confirmed that the agent had some problems at home, more specifically, trouble with her child’s school. Leaving our baggage at the door when we come to work can be easier said than done. I’ve noticed that team leads, supervisors, managers, directors and others often expect it from their agents, but they have a tough time practicing what they preach. In this case, the call center can’t have this happen again, so the agent and her supervisor have a meeting—you know, one of those uncomfortable ones where tensions run high. The agent says, “I know why we’re here, but my family comes first. I understand that if it happens again, I will get into trouble.”

The supervisor says, “I understand how you feel. I have a family of my own, and if my kids needed help, I would do my best to take care of them. I hope you can also understand why we’re here, and why we don’t want this happening again. We don’t want to lose you since we appreciate your efforts.”

The agent responds with, “I promise that this won’t happen again. I like working here. But when the school calls me, I don’t know what to do, and I feel I need to take care of it right away.”

Supervisor responds, “I believe you, so let’s think of a back-up plan just in case it does happen again.” The supervisor provides the agent with details about the company’s employee assistance program (EAP), and helps the agent come up with a contingency plan by asking thoughtful questions such as: “If this happens again, do you have someone you trust who can help you out until you get off of work?” “If this person isn’t available at the time, who else do you have in mind who could help, and whom you trust?” “Is there a possibility to have a word with the school?”

In the story, the supervisor was me. After a month or so, the team member told me that her child was doing much better and had been enrolled in an after-school program that the child enjoys and which keeps them more engaged.

The Businessolver study reported that 78% of employees said they would work longer hours for a leader who displayed empathy. When this issue occurred, I could have emphasized the attendance policy’s expectations, which the agent was already aware of, and warned her that I would have to move her through the disciplinary attendance process the next time it happened.

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Reemphasizing the attendance policy would have kept the meeting short, to the point, and would have reduced the agent's time off the phones.

However, by only putting in a minimal effort, I would have added to the agent's frustration and probably would not have been able to retain her, which adds no value to the business. By taking the time to listen and understand why she was having attendance issues, demonstrating empathy for her situation, providing the EAP details and allowing the agent to formulate her own plan, we were able to not only retain the agent, who has now been with the call center for over two years, and also turn her into one of our top performers.

The following are a few tips that I have learned and have applied on the job to make a difference in some else's life through empathy:

- Listen. Quiet your mental chatter, and do not formulate a response while the other person is talking.
- Acknowledge and paraphrase. Sum up what you've understood from the conversation.
- Label your feelings. Try to name the emotions you're feeling so that you can recognize them, control them and develop a better connection with the person.
- Timing. It's vital to have a conversation while the issue is still fresh.
- Talk less. Remember, this meeting isn't about you. Focus on the other person. You're just there to guide them, understand what's happening, and keep things on track.
- Help when possible. We don't have the answers to everything and we can't help everyone, but sometimes simply taking a moment to listen is all it takes to provide support and show you care.
- Follow up. This can be a quick conversation to see how things are going and whether an additional meeting is needed.

Lastly, and maybe you've been asked this question before, what's the difference between a leader and a manager? I believe it's empathy!



Mark Pereira is a Trainer and On-Site Supervisor at [Briljent LLC](#). He is a Certified Professional Trainer (CPT), Certified Customer Service Professional (CCSP), and Modern Classroom Certified Trainer (MCCT). Mark is a learning leader who applies what he learns to continuously add value to his team while also implementing proven teaching methods to improve retention while taking calls, effective coaching, engaging agents for increased productivity, and leading with empathy.

while surveying the broader customer base to understand what challenges customers are facing related to your product. During this process, be sure to review your surveys for relevance and empathy.

- Take what you've learned and proactively communicate relevant content on a regular basis. For example, update your product knowledge base to address new issues or hold webinars that address frequent questions and common issues that customers have surfaced.
- Anticipate what your customers need next. The world is still in crisis due to the pandemic. What helps is acknowledging that, like the stages of grief, every crisis has its phases—disruption, exploration, and rebuilding. Use these stages to list possible customer needs and develop a plan for communicating appropriately with them at every phase.
- Know that customer advocacy is a long-term strategy. The companies that already understand their customers through exercises like journey mapping will probably weather this crisis more easily.

Brands that effectively demonstrate empathy for customers during challenging times typically report higher customer loyalty and retention rates. Porte provides this example: "Recently, one of our customers, a health insurance company, reported that their customer service satisfaction scores have gone up during the pandemic. What's surprising is that the time to resolve issues is still the same—and the length of the call is actually going up. However, their teams are extending an extra dose of empathy to their customers during the pandemic—particularly when the agent may be faced with a new issue and may not have an answer right away. Agents have been honest saying they understand the situation and will get back to the customer as soon as possible. As a result, that extra dose of empathy is improving the brand image while fostering customer loyalty because keeping customers now is more important than ever."

COMPANY LEADERS TO EMPLOYEES

Some companies claim to be employee-centric and promote their people-first mission statements, meanwhile their top executives routinely display a shocking lack

everything in between, consumers are faced with more complex buying decisions, which can result in even more complicated customer service issues. Consumers are leaning heavily on contact centers and digital channels to get the answers they need, which is why it's so important for brands to integrate empathy into all customer experience touchpoints. I've often said that a company's mission stays the same in good times and bad, but it's the customer experience tactics that change. From grand gestures like cruise lines fully refunding scheduled cruises to

small sincere actions like a personal phone call, empathy can quickly change a negative customer experience into a positive one. But if not done the right way, empathy can go very wrong."

To help mitigate this risk, Porte recommends that brands implement the following steps to demonstrate empathy for their customers:

- Understand customer business needs and see the situation from their point of view.
- Listen on different levels. Conduct personal phone calls with top customers

of empathy toward employees by reverting to profit-driven actions in times of crisis or economic uncertainty.

Customers and employees recognize when leaders are being authentic or whether they're simply paying lip-service to publicized corporate values. Senior leaders that abide by the company's core values help to build credibility and trust among workers. Those that feel exempt or operate above the rules only widen the gap between leadership and staff, and contribute to a toxic, high-turnover culture.

Bhatnagar notes that empathy is the foundation to strong, meaningful workplace relationships. When examining the leader-employee relationship, in particular, she explains that "it is critical that genuine empathy for the employees is utilized in areas such as creating policies, hours, compensation and work environment. To have full engagement in the marketplace today, employees need to know and feel that the executive team values and understands them."

Rembach offers this advice for company executives who want to improve their empathy skills: "Be visible and ask more open-ended questions. Be vulnerable about your feelings and discuss how essential listening is to the customer and workplace experience."

Empathetic leaders are typically much more self-aware, adds Bhatnagar. "With this self-awareness comes increased mindfulness toward thought, actions and behaviors," she says. "Great culture starts at the top! Self-aware leaders attract and hire other self-aware team members. Being self-aware allows us to understand our own personal strengths, weaknesses or opportunities for growth, and our core morals and values."

PRACTICAL POINTER: Many contact center leaders rely on a tried-and-true method for creating empathy for frontline agents among company executives: Spending time on the phones. Execs typically find that plugging in with an agent, or handling calls on their own, can be an eye-opening experience—one that provides them with renewed respect for the role and the work that agents do.

SUPERVISORS TO TEAM MEMBERS

The relationship that frontline supervisors develop with agents has considerable impact on employee engagement and retention. "Having genuine empathy deepens relationships along with the joy of those connections," says Bhatnagar. "In a workplace environment, you will be able to better understand how others think and feel. This alone will help build team collaboration, increase efficiencies and improve productivity. Happier team members make for a better workforce. Today, with our multigenerational and multicultural workforces, it is more important than ever to understand those that are different from you.

"Empathy is a basic building block for strong relationships," she adds. "It is typically displayed through real listening, and also by asking meaningful questions."

Bhatnagar offers the following recommendations for empathetically connecting with others in the workplace:

- Actively listen to each peer, customer, team member and employee. This will give you insights into their concerns, mindsets, thoughts and emotions.
- Delve deeper by asking questions that show you care. Whether you're leading a team or you're an agent trying to understand a customer's problem, asking questions and truly listening will help you begin to cognitively understand their point of view. Regardless of the relationship, we all have something in common and that is "make me feel that I matter."
- Take time to reflect on yourself, your habits and situations in your life. We all have different strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, upbringing, personality traits and temperaments. Since we are all unique, we need to examine our own tendencies. Honest reflection hopefully leads to greater self-awareness and increased mindfulness of one's self.

In their November *Pipeline* column on "The Four Most Important Skills for Leading Hybrid Teams," Afshan Kinder and Mike Aoki recommend that managers "engage in 'getting to know you' conversations." The authors advise: "Don't make your interactions entirely business-focused. Pay attention to your team members' mental health. People want to know that you care about them as

a person. Role-model the empathy you want your agents to show to their customers."

Mark Pereira agrees. As a trainer and on-site supervisor for [Brilljent](#), Pereira firmly believes that when supervisors connect with agents on a human level with understanding and caring, while providing support and resources through challenging times, they can better guide individual agents toward higher performance and engagement (read his story in **THE SIDEBAR**).

Again, self-awareness is a critical skill for leaders at all levels to cultivate, but it is especially valuable when communicating with team members who are on the front lines of your company communicating with anxious callers and dealing with heightened emotions.

As Bhatnagar pointed out in her May 2020 *Pipeline* column, "The COVID-19 Crisis: Do We Put Our Energy into People, Process or Technology?": "Understanding communication styles and needs according to personality temperament is so important as we navigate remotely through stressful times. It is also important to be aware of your temperament and style. We all can adapt once we are aware of our behaviors and tendencies. For instance: Understand yourself and how you tend to communicate under a variety of stress levels; understand each other and how those around you will respond to your communication style; and adapt your style to communicate in a more clear, concise and thoughtful manner to serve the needs of those around you."

PRACTICAL POINTER: To improve empathy skills in a supervisor-to-agent relationship, Rembach advises: "Seek a deeper understanding of your people's feelings, needs and goals. Then use this insight in your one-on-ones and development planning." •



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