

Putting empathy back on the workplace agenda



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One of the more surprising items on the British political agenda this year was empathy. This is largely thanks to Labour leader Ed Miliband, who has cited empathy as one of his core political values and has even recruited the help of empathy expert Professor Simon Baron Cohen to develop his “politics of empathy”. It is too early to know whether Mr. Miliband’s initiative will bear fruit in the political domain. But it isn’t too early for the HR community to take note and consider the case for pushing empathy up its own agenda.

The world of business, like that of politics, is not commonly associated with the word ‘empathy’. In fact, quite the reverse: there are many who believe that

empathy undermines business success. It is true that exploiting employees and deceiving customers by compromising on quality can boost the bottom line. And yet the e-word has been heard tripping off the tongues of some highly reputable corporate leaders, including [Sarah Shields of Dell UK](#) and [Simon Collins of KPMG](#). In this article, we investigate why empathy is creeping up the business agenda and how it can be established more firmly in our working lives.

The relevance of empathy to business relationships

First, we need to establish the relevance of empathy to organisational life. Few would dispute that success at work is closely linked to the success of our working relationships, whether relationships with colleagues, employees, partners, clients, suppliers or any other shareholders. But what are the ingredients that go into the making of a successful working relationship? Of course there are many but close to the top of the list would surely be: “being a good listener and taking into account diverse perspectives.”

Which is precisely what Professor Baron Cohen says that [empathy is all about](#). Indeed, it is hard to dispute the relevance of empathy to business relationships. When empathy is present, business relationships can flourish and economic success too. When empathy is absent, relationships can easily flounder, leading to financial costs in the form of absenteeism, decreased productivity and breach of contract to name a few.

It is worth digging deeper to see precisely how empathy unlocks business success. To begin with, empathy promotes good teamwork. If team members really listen to one another’s ideas and embrace multiple perspectives before settling on an answer, the chances of finding a winning solution are far higher. Next, empathy builds loyalty. If I feel my boss has genuine concern for me and my needs, I am far more likely to feel motivated to give my best at work.

In the same way, customer loyalty can be generated by sincerely listening to customer concerns. Thirdly, empathy can reduce the number and degree of workplace conflicts. Listening to and acknowledging other people’s viewpoints, without necessarily having to agree, is a powerful way both to avoid disputes and resolve them when they do occur.

Having established why empathy is relevant to the workplace and how it can contribute to business success, the burning question remains: what can we do to make empathy more prominent in our working lives?

Creating momentum

To introduce empathy into the often cut-throat world of business is rather like towing a car. To get the thing moving in the first place requires huge effort. In the

context of an organisation trying to create a more empathic culture, this effort might take the form of a few individuals boldly raising their voices in favour of empathy, above the clamour of skepticism and resistance to change. If these early efforts succeed, the movement starts to gain momentum. Beyond a certain point it will continue of its own accord.

To ensure the necessary momentum is gained, changes need to happen at many levels of the organisation. For a start, the people at the top need to be sending out clear signals, through their words and their behaviour, that empathy is core to business communication. Interestingly, Professor Baron Cohen has researched the reasons why a person's empathy might decline and one of the reasons he cites is [obedience to authority](#).

It would follow that if business leaders, through their behaviour, are advocating unempathic relationships, then the rest of the organisation is likely to follow suit. By contrast, if board members demonstrate a willingness to listen to and respect the full diversity of others' opinions, these behaviours will sooner or later find their way into conversations at every level of the organisation. Likewise, even within one business unit, the behaviour of the manager will have ripple effects on the behavioural norms of the team.

The responsibility lies with HR

Of course, for any organisational culture change, the bulk of the responsibility for implementing change lies with HR.

One of the ways it can do this is through training, specifically by adding the skill of empathic listening to the agenda for employee professional development. Listening can be taught as a stand-alone skill, or as part of a skillset such as negotiation, conflict management or managerial skills. Whether negotiating with a supplier, resolving a conflict between staff, or giving a performance review, people can achieve vastly improved outcomes if they have been trained to understand the needs of the other party.

In addition to its training agenda, HR can influence the organisation's empathy level by offering certain services. For instance, if the organisation offers mediation as an option for disputing parties, those that use the service will experience empathic listening from the mediator.

Likewise, offering coaching gives employees a chance to experience empathic listening from their coaches. In both cases, the mediators and coaches act as empathy role models which can positively influence those that use their services and their behaviour at work. Another area where HR can directly affect the organisation's empathy quotient is recruitment. It can do this by ensuring that

qualities such as listening and other interpersonal skills feature high on the list of criteria for selecting new employees at all levels of the organisation.

In the latter part of the 20th century, the self-serving, exploitative approach to business still held sway in many parts of the economy. According to this approach, maximising profits goes hand-in-hand with unempathic behaviours such as sidelining dissenting opinions, exploiting employees and deceiving customers. But, as the 21st century unfolds, it is becoming more widely acknowledged that any gains won through exploitation and deception are easily eroded in the longer term.

Sooner or later, the relationships with those on the receiving end of these behaviours will fall apart, leading to widespread defection by employees and customers alike.

For sustainable success, organisations are starting to understand that empathy is a more reliable strategy. But to turn this strategy into reality, there is much work to be done.