



## Walking in another's shoes. Empathy is a surefire way to demonstrate business development leadership.

By Anne Scarlett, Printed in RainToday and PSMJ

As business development professionals, we know that leadership embodies key traits such as vision; integrity; diplomacy; dedication, and a flexible, open mind. We also know that---leader or not---Emotional Intelligence (identified by Psychologist Daniel Goleman) plays a significant role in our success. This is where empathy comes in. Empathy is considered by some as the second-most important element of emotional intelligence (Number one is self-awareness). Empathy is defined as the ability to identify and understand the wants, needs, and viewpoints of those around you. Empathetic people avoid stereotyping and judging too quickly. Empathizers have the ability to imaginatively enter into another person's feelings, without applying their own personal filters to the situation.

If there was ever a time for empathy, perhaps the time is now. These last couple of years have been especially challenging from economic, global, and political perspectives. On top of that, every year each of the four seasons brings new challenges (and, thankfully, opportunities!) that need to be addressed from both business and personal perspectives. As a result, life can become overwhelming for some of us. We do our best to buck up and manage. Yet, sometimes, we need the help and patience of others. We need empathy.

Your empathy can have a meaningful impact on others. Let me begin by sharing what it means to be on the receiving end of empathy in business contexts:

**>Receive respect around your decisions.** When we are overwhelmed with life, we sometimes make some tough decisions and adjust priorities relating to our business. It's a huge relief when empathetic colleagues, clients, service providers, and bosses offer us support and respect for those decisions.

**>Gain perspective:** 'It's manageable rather than mammoth'. Empathy helps us to relax a bit. We realize that others will have some level of patience with us, and we discover that what we consider mammoth is actually something that the empathizer sees as quite manageable. This eases some of the pressure, and gives us a chance to re-assess.

**>Realize you're not in it alone.** When we receive empathy, we discover that we're not trapped in a vacuum. The empathizer is often willing to brainstorm with us to find new solutions. This collaboration especially helpful to extend deadlines, delegate tasks, and take a critical look at what is necessary versus what can be eliminated.

**>Acknowledge the bigger picture.** Even though we take our careers seriously, many of us ultimately work in order to live, rather than live to work. So when personal circumstances arise such as health and family, it feels safe knowing that others empathize and recognize our bigger picture as human beings, rather than just reacting to our business persona.

So, we know the definition of empathy, and we know the value that empathy can add to our business relationships. Now we must question: *Are we applying empathy to the best of our abilities, further defining ourselves as business development leaders?* Because I am uber-sensitive to the topic this year, I did two things to double check my own level of empathy towards others in my professional life.

First, I created a list of people within these categories:

- Consulting clients

- Consulting prospects
- Fellow consultants/colleagues (For you, it might be 'coworkers, bosses, direct reports')
- Students
- Fellow instructors/Columbia College administrators

Second, I developed a checklist of things to make sure I'm on track with leveraging the highest and best attributes of empathy in professional contexts. When you review this checklist, how do you rank yourself?

1. **Probe effectively.** 'Are you ok?' is certainly kind, but limited. Effective probing looks more like this: What are your challenges? Would it help to talk about with me, or someone more qualified? How can we (at work) best support you? Shall we try to break this down together to make it more manageable? Why don't we research some options?
2. **Don't push them; allow an 'out'.** At any time, give people the option to stop sharing and remain private. Invite them to revisit the topic later, with specifics on when you are available for them. [Don't say you are available 24/7 if you are not!]
3. **Offer your help (within reason).** But take care to only offer what you can truly deliver. Any broken promises will only add to other person's stress.
4. **Be persistent.** They may not take you up on your initial offers to help. Keep offering, in a variety of forms (in-person, by phone, over email). Since you yourself are busy and do not want this to fall off your radar, set reminders to check in with them on a regular basis.
5. **Create healthy boundaries, for both of your sake.** While you want to be helpful, you also need to respect their privacy. Further, you may not want to become too deeply involved. Ultimately, you may mutually agree to gain limited knowledge of the situation---just enough to allow you to be patient, brainstorm options, and even help the person find other resources that will be more appropriate for detailed discussions (ie a counselor).
6. **Continually monitor the situation.** Depending upon what is being asked of you, and/or what sacrifices you are making to accommodate the person with whom you are empathizing, keep a keen eye out for any time that person may take you for granted or take advantage of the situation. I'm sorry to report that it can happen. Nonetheless, it's best to err on the side of trusting their intentions, until that trust has been broken.
7. **Consider affect on others.** When you are making exceptions or adjustments, or providing extra resources, always consider how this might impact the others in your world. Believe it or not, this is applicable whether you are the boss, the colleague, or even the subordinate.
8. **Minimalize advice; omit judgment.** Empathy and advice do not necessarily go hand in hand. Just because you are providing support and understanding does not mean that your advice is needed, nor appropriate. In fact, in most business relationships, it may behoove you to steer clear of offering advice when it relates to personal matters. It's best to determine case by case. One thing is clear: do not judge their situations, nor their actions. Instead, remember that this is about walking in their shoes, applying their filters (not your own).

Take it from a person who has received some much-appreciated empathy these past few months: the kindness and professionalism from those empathizers will be burned in my memory for quite some time. I have every intention of paying it forward. In the business environment, offering empathy is an invaluable talent, worthy of honing and refining to develop the very best in your business development leadership abilities. Where do you stand? Do you have what it takes to provide 360-degrees of empathy in your business relationships?