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for every manager and executive.”

**JAY BAER** founder of *Convince & Convert* and coauthor of *Talk Triggers*

# THE EMPATHY EDGE

**Harnessing the Value of  
Compassion as an Engine for Success**

*A playbook for brands, leaders, and teams*

**MARIA ROSS**

# INTRODUCTION

## Empathy at Work

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I HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED that compassion, empathy, and kindness can be big assets in the business world. Throughout my career, I sought to rewrite the prevailing cultural script about business success: one *could* be compassionately competitive, kindly ambitious, and empathetic yet decisive. This mindset resulted in great success for me personally, as well as for my employers and clients.

I also believe that companies can make money *while* acting with kindness and empathy. The two are not mutually exclusive.

My understanding of the importance of empathy in business became much more personal in August 2008 when I awoke in a hospital ICU. My head was half-shaved and I had IVs in my arm. I was unable to see and had no short-term memory.

A few days earlier, I had been suffering from an intense headache and vomiting—symptoms that had plagued me for almost two months but, on that particular day, had left me unable to function. My husband had decided to leave work at midday, so, luckily, he was home when I'd collapsed, unconscious, on our bathroom floor. At the age of thirty-five—in the healthy, vibrant prime of my life—I'd experienced a ruptured brain aneurysm. An ambulance rushed me to the hospital, where emergency surgery saved my life.

I was in the hospital for six weeks, first in the neurological ICU and then in-patient rehab. The slow work of recovery began. The cerebral rupture was so severe that it caused hemorrhaging in my retinas, resulting in near blindness. Surgery in my left eye and more than ten months of recovery for my right eye eventually reversed the damage.

That time is mostly lost to me, save for a few snatches of memory here and there, like images remembered from a dream. Temporarily without my short-term memory, I didn't become fully aware of my surroundings until September, even though I was awake and talking to people.

Harborview Medical Center and the University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC), both part of UW Medicine in Seattle, was where I began the long process of reclaiming my life. Not only did the “brain ninjas” pull me back from the brink, but the care and compassion I received as a patient deeply impacted me. When you're sick or injured, you are extraordinarily vulnerable. You lie in a bed, weak and sometimes half-dressed, while doctors and nurses come in at all hours to poke and prod you. Medical students observe you like you are some sort of oddity. You are left alone and helpless for long stretches with nothing but a TV and a call button. You feel exposed and totally reliant on strangers.

Sadly, many healthcare systems are structured in ways that leave patients feeling insignificant and burdensome at a time when empathy is needed most acutely. But UWMC, like many hospitals around the world, believes in and practices Patient and Family Centered Care (PFCC).

PFCC is a global movement that recognizes the importance of patient input and family (or caregiver) involvement in ensuring positive recovery outcomes. It's a framework for honoring the unique skills, strengths, and preferences of each patient so their input becomes integral to medical decisions

throughout the process. The core pillars of PFCC include information sharing, collaboration, and respect.

In other words, hospitals using PFCC are putting policies, processes, and resources in place that focus on their patients' needs and feelings, essentially treating them like, you know, *humans*, not assets or beds. These hospitals are seeing better health outcomes, improved quality of care, improved safety, higher satisfaction ratings, reduced hospitalization and re-admission rates, better clinical and staff satisfaction, and a wiser allocation of resources. All those benefits translate to reduced costs, higher profits, and positive goodwill for the organization and its brand.

UWMC, like many other hospitals focused on PFCC, has adopted empathy as their watchword to better serve patients, resulting in better patient outcomes, improved internal morale, and, yes, some damn good press.

When I awoke, scared and confused and unable to remember anything from one moment to the next, my family and I knew nothing about PFCC. But during this vulnerable time in the hospital, here's what we observed:

- No one—be they doctor, administrator, or nurse—ever walked into my room without first knocking, introducing themselves (to this temporarily blind woman), and asking if they could come in.
- My husband was able to be by my side for as long as I needed him. There were no official visiting hours.
- Any time instructions were given, hospital staff ensured I had my caregiver (or a proxy) in the room to take notes since I could not remember or sometimes even process the conversation. If they had to wait for someone to be there, they would.

- My dignity and intelligence were honored when staff took the time to explain recommended procedures, jargon, or acronyms as well as answer any questions we had.
- When I asked for help as I stumbled through the hallway with my impaired sight, or my family needed assistance, no one ever said, “That’s not my job.” They always stopped what they were doing and found the right person to help us.
- I was given the power to choose my food every day from a menu of options. This small semblance of control during a scary crisis meant so much to me—and it also meant I had a lot of chocolate cream pie.
- The hospital helped coordinate my post-discharge care and followed up with numerous phone calls and check-ins. They even gave us a binder of resources and contact numbers should we have any questions.

The experience was so profound that when I fully recovered, I began volunteering for UWMC’s patient and family education committee as a patient advisor. By doing so, I was able to represent the voice of patients as the staff made key decisions.

Imagine: an organization that treats its “customers” not in the ways employees themselves would like to be treated but the way the *individual customer* wants to be treated. An organization whose business model has been set up to gain efficiencies, decrease costs, and increase customer satisfaction based on compassion and taking another person’s point of view.

That’s the power of empathy at work.

ALTHOUGH THIS TRANSFORMATIVE experience kicked my own compassion into high gear, I’ve been a student of empathy all my life. I identify as a storyteller, and empathy

is core to this lifelong passion of mine. I know from experience that stories have the power to inspire, provoke, teach, delight, and motivate us. And in order to tell a good story, you must be able to use empathy to live in someone else's world, understand their point of view, and imagine their emotions and experiences. The empathy that drives storytelling is at the heart of my work as a brand strategist, helping companies articulate and share their value to connect more fully with their customers, clients, or constituents.

We are experiencing, as former president Barack Obama so eloquently put it, an “empathy deficit.” He was referring to the United States, but I think we can extend this lack of empathy to the whole planet. Too many people are taking sides, ostracizing the “other,” and generally failing to be on their best behavior. We've become numb to tragedy, we accept the hurtful comments of Internet trolls as standard behavior, and we hide behind screens rather than connect with those around us on buses, in playgrounds, and at coffee shops. Many sense this chasm but are not sure how to cross it. Some feel empathetic but are left wringing their hands and not knowing how to put that empathy into compassionate action.

What better way to chip away at this dilemma than by starting with the place where a lot of us spend more than forty hours each week: work.

If organizational leaders can shift the cultural mindset around what gives a business a competitive advantage and show how empathy can increase financial success, productivity, and retention (among other benefits we'll explore in this book), maybe the positive behaviors individuals adopt as a result will spill over into their personal interactions. Maybe, just maybe, our world could become a little bit better. A sneaky access point, I know. But logical and, as we'll see in these pages, extremely possible.

While I'm a brand strategist and not an empathy scientist, I've found that sometimes an outsider with deep and persistent curiosity can serve as a helpful guide through a subject; in fact, sometimes it takes this fresh perspective to see the nuances of the big picture and bring everything into focus. As a bonus, when you don't know "the rules" inherent to a particular topic, you're not afraid to break them. (Or gleefully stomp them to smithereens, when necessary.) You can explore in innovative ways, ask taboo questions without hesitation, and tease out unexpected conclusions.

I am an expert in how empathy plays a key role in effective, resonant brand strategy. I've been crafting brand blueprints and marketing strategies for more than twenty-five years. My clients range from Fortune 500 companies to fast-growth startups to scrappy solopreneurs. *All* of them want to appear accessible and compassionate in their brand messaging and connect with their customers, yet they don't always know how to support that desire with authentic action. I help them make those connections and walk their empathetic talk. Together, we ferret out how they can highlight their empathetic strengths so their customers or clients believe their brand claims. And as an extension, we often end up talking about how effective leaders seem to get inside their customers' heads (and, in turn, the heads of another key audience: their employees) to achieve better engagement. Our conversation about branding leads to one about how to change hiring practices, internal policies, or customer service processes to truly *be* an empathetic brand.

I've done countless hours of consulting around what empathy really means to organizations. I've shown them how to live it every day, instead of just slapping some appealingly compassionate language on their websites. Connecting empathy to work is something I do constantly and naturally. In this

book, I'll share how you can use some of the same empathy practices I employ to help clients connect to their customers as a way of strengthening your leadership style, deepening your workplace culture, and building a brand of which you and your colleagues can feel proud.

Because, let's face it, there's never been a better time to break the outdated rules of how business *should* work and build a truly empathetic company.

Organizations now have an unprecedented opportunity to transform their cultures, for better or worse. There are three main reasons:

1. For-profit companies are reshaping their role in society.
2. Employees are working more hours but also have more options about where to work.
3. Technological changes sweeping into organizations are changing our roles, and those changes require our uniquely human skills to be effective.

Let's look at how powerful for-profit organizations are redefining their roles. In the 1980s, corporate America adopted economist Milton Friedman's view, as summarized by the *Seattle Times*, that "a company's sole social responsibility is to make money for its owners without breaking the law." But many organizations are now wielding their considerable clout to do more good in the world, a concept known as *conscious capitalism*.

Several years ago, Howard Schultz, former CEO and now chairman emeritus of Starbucks, made it his mission to take a stand on political, societal, and often controversial topics, such as race relations, veteran affairs, and LGBTQ rights. In an interview quoted in the *Seattle Times* in 2015, Schultz said, "The size and the scale of the company and the platform that we have allows us, I think, to project a voice into the debate,

and hopefully that's for good . . . We are leading [Starbucks] to try to redefine the role and responsibility of a public company.”

And even companies who don't yet have compassion built into their mission statements have stepped up to voice their collective concerns over social injustices. When things got ugly during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, many were heartened to see corporations using their power to defy the closed-minded, sexist, and xenophobic rhetoric being tossed about. While many individuals felt powerless, influential organizations were able to take a bold and effective stand on racial equality, immigrant acceptance, and LGBTQ and women's rights. And many of them did so using one of the largest platforms of all: 2017's Super Bowl broadcast.

Advertiser 84 Lumber chose to depict a Mexican mother and daughter trying to seek asylum in the United States, where they are heartbroken to find that—after all their journey's struggles and obstacles—they are met by a large wall. The commercial concluded as a hopeful cliffhanger, with the young girl pulling out collected scraps that formed an American flag; online, viewers got to see a happy ending where the pair eventually find a door, built with 84 Lumber, of course.

In another Super Bowl ad, Audi presented a charming story of a concerned father whose little girl competes against all the boys in a soapbox derby. The dad relays his fears that “she will never be seen as—or paid at a rate—equal to men.” But in the end, he wants to rewrite the story for her, and the ad speaks to the company's commitment to equal pay.

While there were calls for boycotts because of such ads, there were many more people who showed support, vowing to shop with these companies and reward them with their dollars.

With simple television spots, these for-profit companies showed us that they could indeed make an empathetic impact

and, in some cases, transform the culture and conversation. They could show us the best of ourselves and encourage us to be decent human beings, all while promoting their own products and boosting their bottom lines. If they embraced empathy as a core value and earnestly lived it out, they might be able to create an example and help to establish a new norm of compassion among us all.

Another reason that organizations are poised to change the conversation around empathy is that employees are working longer and harder than they have in the past—and they are more willing to leave a position if they are unhappy. The average American, for example, works close to fifty hours per week and those who are able will leave a job if they believe the company is mistreating them or their customers. Notwithstanding the negative psychological and health impacts that more hours at work can have, this is a wake-up call to organizations to transform *the way* they work before it's too late. People are seeking ways to make their long work hours more fulfilling, and this is much easier to do when they work for a company that aligns with their own values and treats them with respect.

Enter empathy.

While in-demand talent spends slightly more time at work, they now also have more options. They won't tolerate working in environments that do not respect them as workers or value their customers. If they sense a manager or a company in general is not understanding, values-driven, or able to treat their customers right, they are happy to job hop.

Rebecca Friese Rodskog, cofounder and managing partner of FutureLeaderNow, advises companies on how to create more innovative workplaces and cultures so employees can thrive, which trickles down into reduced turnover, more productivity, and amazing brand experiences for customers. She

has pointed out that if organizations want to attract the best talent and keep them happy, it's imperative that they nurture leaders, create cultures, and build brands that align with their workforce's core values. If your organization can't identify employee core values, you'll fail to attract and retain great people. If your company crafts a mission statement that has no place for worker input or runs counter to employee beliefs, that mission will crash and burn. If your leadership is embarrassingly out of touch with life among the ranks, they'll never inspire innovation and creativity in their employee base.

So, how do you understand their perspectives, listen to their needs, and identify their core values? How do you ensure your organization engages, rewards, and supports its workers?

In a word, empathy.

In an age when algorithms and robots seem to be taking over the business landscape, it would be easy to assume a "soft skill" like empathy would no longer be needed. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Heed the words of tech futurist Christina "CK" Kerley, who advises some of the world's largest companies on how to embrace, not fear, the technological changes that are coming our way. From her vantage point, it is imperative that leaders and organizations start talking empathy. Given all this automation, these so-called soft skills will matter most. The very qualities that make us uniquely *human* will become our competitive advantage. Robots won't render us obsolete: instead they will make our human skills more relevant than ever.

SOME OF YOU might see empathy as a savvy PR move that will earn your company more customer loyalty... and dollars. And it's true that building an empathetic brand means more customer loyalty, which translates to more revenue.

Believe it or not, I'm glad you're reading this book, too.

I once worked as a marketing manager for a global company. Among other duties, I helped clients who were facing strong competition for the first time create positive brand perceptions. These clients would often partner with community organizations to support charitable events, school programs, and populations in need. I tried to steer clients toward the more charitable, high-impact efforts that would showcase them as good corporate citizens. For a mere \$5,000, I told them, we could donate an entire semi-trailer full of food to a local food bank. Our clients were good people who loved the idea of filling the shelves for hungry people (who wouldn't?), but at the end of the day, they were doing it for good press. The media would show up, hands would be shaken, photos snapped, and the clients would look like a bunch of damned heroes. In my mind, we were still doing a good thing—even if the client was doing it for selfish reasons. After all, at the end of the day, the food bank would be stocked and hungry people could eat. Until the big day arrived, and I saw how it all went down.

Executive bigwigs showed up alongside excited front-line employees. They were there to help unload the truck and pound the backs of the food bank volunteers—but also for the photo ops. They'd planned on the great PR, but they didn't plan on being genuinely moved by seeing how much good their generous gift would do and how many lives they'd impact. They didn't plan on making real connections with the volunteers and patrons, taking on individual volunteer shifts after the event, or forging an ongoing relationship with the charity. They didn't plan on having their empathy stirred. But it was. And they were transformed, right on the spot.

If you do a good deed for a selfish reason, are you a scoundrel? Maybe. If you see visibly empathetic business practices as a great way to add some shine to your company reputation,

are you an opportunist? Perhaps. But the pragmatist is willing to accept the value in impactful deeds even if they stem from underhanded motivations. After all, you can have all the internal empathy in the known universe, but if you don't act upon it, you'll never spark change outside yourself. Forcing yourself to go through the motions of acting compassionately can cause genuine compassion to take root.

Naturally, I'd love for everyone who reads this book to embrace compassionate tactics because they are supportive and sustainable. But those of you who are here for that shiny topcoat of empathy that you believe will boost your bottom line? You are welcome, too. I will Trojan horse you into authentic empathy if I have to.

I want all of us to understand empathy's role in our daily lives and, more importantly, how we can turn our heartfelt *feelings* into positive *actions*. I want every person within an organization, at every level, to see that empathy is an asset, not a weakness. I am recruiting you to my Empathetic Army as someone who enthusiastically spreads the word that authentic connection breeds phenomenal success. While empathy currently offers an edge in the market because it is so rare, the traits and practices shared in this book will (hopefully) soon become the organizational standard.

To be authentic and sustainable, we must practice empathy from the inside out. It starts with leaders adopting an empathetic mindset and leadership style. This, in turn, influences the internal culture that they create. And, finally, that way of being informs the everyday actions of those people on their customers and the community, thus creating an empathetic brand impression and reputation.

The book is broken out in sections to discuss how each circle builds on the next, creating a ripple effect.

Here's what I hope you will take away from reading this book:

- a belief that empathy is an asset for entrepreneurs and organizations;
- proof that active empathy fuels great businesses and brands and creates profitable, scalable infrastructures;
- habits and practices that will help you become a more empathetic leader and create thriving cultures where your teams stay loyal and can do their best work;
- policies that your organization can adopt to create a positive and empathetic brand reputation with your customers, community, . . . and future hires;
- tangible actions to cultivate empathy and have an impact right where you are and *right now*, regardless of the size of your sphere of influence; and
- a desire to spread the word that authentic connection breeds success.

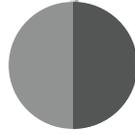
I want to live in a world where empathy forms the backbone of all business. A world in which we align our personal and professional values, so we don't have to be two different people at home and at work.

And I need your help building it.

How? Let's look at how empathy shows up in successful companies of all sizes, not just charitable organizations or non-profits. Read on to learn how the best and most progressive leaders and businesses have begun to adopt and employ mindfully compassionate business tactics—and what you can do to put these into practice in your own work and organization.

So, let's get started.





PART I

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**WHY MORE  
BUSINESSES  
NEED TO  
CULTIVATE  
EMPATHY NOW**

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## EMPATHY EXPLORED

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*Empathy isn't dictated to us by a focus group or a statistical analysis. Empathy is the powerful (and rare) ability to imagine what motivates someone else to act.*

SETH GODIN

CHRISTINA HARBRIDGE WAS an eighteen-year-old college student when her dad became very ill. Determined to support him through his sickness, she searched for a way to make money, take care of him, and continue going to school. She began working part-time at a collection agency. The work was emotionally taxing but paid double minimum wage and allowed her to juggle her other responsibilities. It was far from perfect, but she knew it would have to do.

On her first day at work, Harbridge met her new colleagues. They were some of the nicest people she had ever met, and as they gathered together in the break room, she thought maybe the job wouldn't be so bad after all. But when they returned to the collection floor and everyone began making calls, Harbridge could not believe her ears. She stood at a filing cabinet, unable to breathe, her hands shaking. The colleagues who had

been so friendly and jovial toward each other were cruel and awful toward the people from whom the agency was trying to collect payments. They yelled, they shamed, they used scare tactics freely and without remorse. She was appalled by this night-and-day switch.

“I was pretty young and I was like, ‘What the hell is this?’” says Harbridge. “I saw in that moment—I literally remember what I was wearing, it was so profound—I thought, *Somebody’s got to start a collection agency that works by being nice.* We were making and taking thousands of phone calls. What if these phone calls actually made people’s days?”

She couldn’t get the idea out of her head.

While Harbridge worked her agency job, she kept trying to change company policies and customer service tactics from the inside as best she could, but it was no use. She later switched gears and started writing software for collection agencies. But the spark of that first-day idea remained, and eventually she started her own agency, building it around the idea that kindness could go hand in hand with collections.

“I had no idea what I was doing,” Harbridge says, “but I knew we were going to make this work by being nice. Maybe we won’t collect as much, but people will *want* to work with us.”

She keenly recognized that collection agents are usually the last type of contact a company attempts when a customer owes them money. And because many of Harbridge’s agency’s clients were healthcare providers, she and her employees were calling patients—vulnerable people who were ill or in pain. She knew the healthcare providers would want courteous, respectful people to be making those connections on their behalf. Harbridge was convinced there was a market for companies outside the healthcare industry who wanted their collection customers to be treated well, too. She believed that the number-one goal of a collection call was not to get

money right away: it was to establish a trusting relationship, so people felt comfortable telling you the truth. “If they tell you what’s going on, you can help them,” Harbridge says. “A lot of the calls the industry was making were about getting compliance rather than building trust and commitment.”

Harbridge’s collection agency broke the rules. For thirty minutes each day, her team met in a circle and did various exercises to help them “stay in love with people.” This training was designed to help her employees stay open and empathetic during a tough day spent in conversation with people who are deeply upset. Harbridge was not fooling herself: these are not fun calls to get, nor are they enjoyable calls to make. And she estimates that more than 70 percent of the people on the other end of the line were, understandably, distraught and rattled when her employees explained why they were calling.

“Our biology doesn’t want to give empathy when we’re uncomfortable,” says Harbridge. Instead, she says, “We want to correct people.” In other words, being nice when someone is yelling at you requires a lot of human development and careful system design. She created the daily training practice to bolster her people’s confidence and remind them that they were doing good and important work—the calls needed to be made, but they were making them in the most empathetic way possible.

This approach paid off. “There was a direct correlation between how the debtor felt about themselves when we called them and whether or not they paid,” says Harbridge. Her agency ended up collecting three times more than the industry average: 32.2 percent successful collections as opposed to the typical 9.9 percent. In addition, her collectors did such a fabulous job of establishing trusting, supportive relationships with their clients that they regularly received thank-you cards, even wedding invitations!

“I am not kidding about that,” she says, laughing. “We also had to have a toy box in the front of our office because so many people brought their kids to meet their bill collectors.”

To what does Harbridge attribute her collection agency’s success? Quite frankly, she stumbled upon the power of empathy at work simply because she believed it was the right thing to do. Instead of just telling her people to “be nicer,” Harbridge led by example. She changed processes and developed training to support the behaviors she wanted to see, and she established an internal culture that helped her collectors thrive. As a leader, she provided needed and consistent support each day to her team. She even created a bonus structure that didn’t simply reward employees for the amount of money collected alone, but instead tallied up the number of thank-you cards they received. (Unsolicited cards, of course. Team members weren’t allowed to request a thank-you card from a client.) And guess what? The person with the most money collected usually had the most thank-you cards, too.

Harbridge believes that the reason debtors not only paid up but also invited her team to their weddings is because her company’s leadership, culture, and external brand reputation were all rooted in empathy. The trust they built was genuine; they were trained to earnestly care about the people they were contacting.

“We gave them a feeling they weren’t getting anywhere else, which was ‘I hear you, I understand you, and I want to know more. Tell me more.’ When someone was upset, we weren’t faux-listening; we were fulfilling their need to be heard and understood.”

The most telling revelation: her team members’ total surprise at how effective this kindness-focused approach could be. Seasoned collection agents were shocked by how much easier their jobs became when they acted with empathy instead of shaming, degrading, and disrespecting debtors.

“It was accidental, the revenue success,” says Harbridge. “We did it because we thought there was a market for people wanting their customers to be treated well. It really transformed my thinking about humans.”

Many organizations reached out to Harbridge, trying to figure out how she did what she did. Even politicians wanted to understand her secret sauce and sought her advice. Harbridge eventually founded Allegory, a behavior change consultancy that helps companies and leaders achieve higher performance by fostering more emotional literacy with and between employees and customers. This means helping teams work with uncomfortable internal and external situations and emotions, so they can be okay with not being okay. Allegory sees “discomfort as delicious” and believes that when teams allow discomfort, they can improve outcomes. Allegory’s goal is to teach companies to create a productive environment where real feelings are expressed, people are heard, and each situation is approached in a way that turns feedback into productive action.

“Feelings drive behavior,” Harbridge says. “If someone makes us feel small, we’re probably not going to buy from them—or work hard for them, if they are the boss. That may induce compliance but not commitment. Any organization that is missing empathy with customers is missing sales, and any leader lacking empathy is missing opportunities to be more successful. Not a very rational strategy.”

Harbridge’s success is a powerful example of what empathy can do when infused into the fabric of an organization at every level. She broke the mold in her industry by insisting that the work could and *should* be done with empathy at its heart, and she proved that her revolutionary approach could lead to phenomenal success.

What about those of us who feel ready to incorporate more empathy into our own work but aren’t sure where to start? How do entrepreneurs launching startups *and* employees of

established global corporations enact change? How can we flex our empathy muscles to benefit not only ourselves but also the organizations for which we work and, ultimately, our customers? What can companies gain from fostering empathy at the leadership, internal culture, and external brand levels? How can that success transform the players and, in the process, make us all better humans?

To answer these questions, we need to examine what empathy is, how it influences our behavior, and what we can do to cultivate and deploy it in our working lives. We also need to understand where empathy comes from, so we can foster it in ourselves and others.

## **What Is Empathy?**

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You probably have an idea of what empathy is or isn't, at least according to your own experience. But before we dig any deeper into how empathy develops and impacts our lives, we need to get on the same page as to what empathy *means*. Is empathy the same as sympathy or compassion?

The word *sympathy*, which stems from the Greek *sympatheia*, or “fellow-feeling,” back in the mid-1500s meant something akin to being in harmony with someone. But today, “it tends to convey commiseration, pity, or feelings of sorrow for someone else who is experiencing misfortune.” *Empathy*, introduced centuries later, is what we feel when we haven't necessarily had the same experience but can actively imagine what that experience might have felt like, and perhaps (but not necessarily) even feel some of their emotions ourselves. It's about putting ourselves in the shoes of another.

Parissa Behnia, executive coach, business consultant, and creator of the Sixsense Empathy Model™, illustrates the

difference, saying, “Empathy worries about the drivers to how someone got to a point in time. Sympathy is me standing directly in front of someone and just judging only what I see in front of me. Sympathy does not care about the steps someone took to get to that point in time—it only cares about the outcome in the moment. Empathy understands the outcome and how you got there.”

You don’t have to have personal experience with a specific set of circumstances to have empathy. You just need to understand and respect the steps taken along that journey.

Next, let’s clear up how empathy differs from compassion. The words are often used interchangeably, and they reference related concepts, but they’re not exact synonyms.

Empathy is a perception, urge, or mindset. It has to do with putting yourself in someone else’s place and imagining what life is like for them.

Compassion, to me, is activity, decision making, or response. It has to do with *taking action* that results in kindness, typically toward another person or group.

Such action can be fueled by either empathy or sympathy, says Sara Schairer, founder and CEO of Compassion It, a global movement to encourage daily acts of compassion, and a Stanford-trained teacher of Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT). She writes, “Compassion takes empathy and sympathy a step further. When you are compassionate, you feel the pain of another (i.e., empathy) or you recognize that the person is in pain (i.e., sympathy), and then you do your best to alleviate the person’s suffering from that situation.”

I think of empathy as the engine but compassion as the result, or the expression of empathy. Compassion doesn’t always stem from empathy. It can, but it doesn’t have to.

Think about a middle-income office worker walking past a homeless woman who asks for a dollar. The office worker

gives the woman the dollar, which can be seen as a compassionate act: help was asked for and given. Dig deeper, and that dollar could have been given out of empathy: the office worker could have a family member who was or is homeless, be a veteran and know former military personnel homelessness is on the rise, or simply be able to imagine how stressful it would be to have no home. In that case, giving the dollar is a compassionate act driven by empathy. But the office worker might feel guilty about the other dozen times he passed this homeless woman and didn't offer help or feel pity, or he was impatient to get on with his day and sees giving the dollar as a quick fix. In that case, he is acting compassionately without even *attempting* to put himself in the homeless woman's shoes.

Susan Spinrad Esterly has been a psychologist for more than twenty years. She used to be a professor at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, which was one of the few schools in the world that espoused humanistic values such as mindfulness, empathy, and compassion before they became fashionable and prevalent in leadership circles.

"Empathy essentially asks you to have an idea of what someone else is experiencing, seeing, sensing," she says. "Compassion, I think, is broader than empathy because compassion says, 'I will put love in there with it.'" Esterly goes on to say that without that good intent, empathy can have a dark, manipulative side. "The best con artists are probably, oddly, very empathic in terms of getting where someone else is coming from and using that to motivate them."

Even disentangled from compassion, empathy is a contentious concept. The various definitions can divide people as decisively as a sports debate between Yankee and Red Sox fans. Scientists and scholars continually argue about what empathy really is, its relevance to modern life, and its function within societies, bringing some fascinating conundrums to light. Let's examine a few of these expert opinions

before defining the function of empathy for the purposes of this book.

Psychologist Paul Bloom, author of the controversial book *Against Empathy*, defines empathy as “the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does. If your suffering makes me suffer, if I feel what you feel, that’s empathy.” He believes that acting on purely emotional empathy is myopic, short-sighted, and unsustainable. He argues that emotional empathy can sometimes impair our ability to make rational decisions in certain situations or think clearly about the long-term consequences of those actions on others.

To illustrate, he cites a study done by C. Daniel Batson and his colleagues, in which subjects were told about a ten-year-old girl named Sheri Summers, a child with a fatal disease who is in line for a treatment that would alleviate her pain. When subjects were simply asked what to do, they fairly decided that she needed to wait her turn on the list because more needy children were ahead of her. When they were asked to imagine what she *felt*, however, they tended to move her up on the list, putting her ahead of other children who needed the treatment more.

Bloom states, “Empathy is like a spotlight directing attention and aid to where it’s needed. But spotlights have a narrow focus, and this is one problem with empathy. It does poorly in a world where there are many people in need and where the effects of one’s actions are diffuse, often delayed, and difficult to compute, a world in which an act that helps one person in the here and now can lead to greater suffering in the future.”

I should note that Bloom and his contemporaries are not against *compassion*. They’re not heartless human beings. They make the case that there is more to kindness and morality than empathy alone, and that both the pros and cons should be considered. Bloom advises against making all decisions based solely on emotional empathy—in essence, based on

a feeling—because that can lead to ignoring or denouncing logic, facts, or science, something which is happening in our world today far too often.

On the other hand, many classical thinkers and modern thought leaders believe empathy in all its forms is essential to human survival and to making the world a better place. Charles Darwin—though most well known for *On the Origin of Species* and the concept of survival of the fittest—strongly made a case that cooperation and reciprocity were as vital to evolutionary success as competition. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin wrote, “Those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best and rear the greatest number of offspring.” It should be noted that he used the term *sympathy* to mean our modern definition of *empathy*.

In fact, sympathy and empathy were used interchangeably before Darwin came on the scene. Social scientist Roman Krznaric writes in his book *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It*, that early references to empathy evoked the sentiment but did not use the actual word. While eighteenth-century Scottish social thinker Adam Smith championed self-interest as the catalyst for societal improvement in *The Wealth of Nations*—and is often seen as a forefather to the “Greed is right. Greed works” business philosophy menacingly portrayed in the film *Wall Street*—he surprisingly started defining empathy in his earlier work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith used the term *sympathy* but, according to Krznaric, “argued that we have a natural capacity for stepping into another person’s shoes,” which Smith described as “changing places in fancy with the sufferer.”

In short, people have been arguing about these definitions, distinctions, and semantics for hundreds of years. No wonder empathy has become such a heated and confusing topic!

But let's fast-forward to the twenty-first century, shall we? There's still plenty of disagreement in the present day, but it emerges more subtly. In recent years, prominent figures in politics, science, business, and art have examined empathy's modern meaning and underlined its importance within contemporary culture. For instance, in a college commencement speech, Barack Obama urged graduates "to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us—the child who's hungry, the steelworker who's been laid off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town. When you think like this—when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers—it becomes harder not to act, harder not to help."

Author and leadership expert Simon Sinek shares this sentiment and emphasizes that empathy is crucial to successful leadership. He defines empathy as "the ability to recognize and share other people's feelings," and he believes it's "the most important instrument in a leader's toolbox."

So, although a subset of experts assert that empathy has risks and negative repercussions, many respected scientists and leaders from diverse backgrounds believe that empathy isn't just beneficial, it's *vital*. Still, those thinkers may be using wildly different definitions of the word. In fact, every person I interviewed for this book had a slightly different interpretation of what empathy meant to them and what it meant in an organizational context. However, some common themes did emerge in their responses. Empathy means:

- seeing things through another person's perspective;
- crossing a line of difference to experience someone else's truth and reality;

- having enough understanding and sensitivity toward a situation, scenario, or person to try to make that situation, scenario, or person better than it would be if you lacked that understanding;
- the ability to sit with discomfort and not have to fix it;
- listening and hearing what is going on for someone else; and
- moving through the world with an understanding that everyone is struggling and trying their best—and holding that in your heart to let it shape your interactions with people.

Common threads—including understanding outside perspectives and a desire to connect—weave through these varied interpretations. The nuances are diverse, but concepts of respect, sensitivity, and shared feelings unite them.

What’s that? All this talk about feelings is making you roll your eyes? Fear not. There are two huge reasons to embrace empathetic tactics in your business life.

First, social psychology distinguishes between two types of empathy. *Emotional empathy* means you feel how the other person feels, full stop. This is what many of us think of when we think of empathy. You literally experience their fears, anger, anxieties, and excitement as if they were all happening to you. Studies of mirror neurons have shown that this emotional empathy is an instinctive trait in human beings and other animals. But *cognitive empathy* means you understand how another person sees the world. This is the type of empathy that Bloom and his contemporaries have no issues with and are comfortable accepting.

Such perspective-taking can then intellectually inform your reaction in the situation—often solving the problem with compassion. Being empathetic doesn’t negate your ability to make a rational, reasoned business decision.

Second, emotional connection, stories, and experiences drive current business trends. A 2017 Forbes.com article states, “In today’s age of brand experience, it seems that emotional engagement is proving to be more and more critical to achieving winning results, and effective storytelling and digital marketing are at the heart of this movement.” Empathy can play a big role in creating that emotional engagement.

The importance of empathy to business success plays out in the work of Fierce Conversations, a Seattle-based company that works with clients to have tough, honest, and richer conversations so they can clarify priorities, reduce costs, and boost profits. Its philosophy is that many of the organizational problems that manifest as high turnover, low productivity, or missed goals stem from ineffective conversations. And the root of effective conversations is often—you guessed it—more empathy and a greater ability to take perspective.

Fierce has seen incredible results for clients that tackle operational challenges from a training and communications perspective. “Our work used to be, and can still to some current extent be, classified as soft skills,” says president Stacey Engle. “The reality is that conversation skills are *hard skills*. What gets talked about, how it gets talked about, and who gets invited to the table determines what will happen... or won’t happen... We must answer questions like, ‘What are the real business pain points your team is experiencing?’ and be willing to listen to their point of view. The missed deadlines, the losing sales, the constant rework, and on and on—those absolutely are tied to empathetic communication... and those have real top- and bottom-line impacts.”

For this book, let’s agree to examine empathy through this lens:

Empathy means being willing and able to see, understand, and (where appropriate) feel another person's perspective and, further, to use that information to act compassionately.

The action part is key: how are individual behaviors, internal practices, or external dealings informed by an empathetic mindset? It's not enough to *feel* or even *claim* empathy; people and organizations need to *act* on it.

Action. This is the fundamental link that many definitions of empathy miss. Empathy drives compassionate action, and such action is what can drive business success.

Dr. Zanette Johnson agrees. She is an experience designer, management consultant, neuroscientist, and mindfulness practitioner who earned her PhD at Stanford in learning science and technology design. "A lot of the definitions of empathy seem fundamentally incomplete to me because they are thought-oriented and neglect the body, as well as the experience of action," she explains. "To me, compassion is empathy in action."

Let's be very clear: being an empathetic organization does not mean caving to demands or simply "giving the employee/customer/colleague what they want." That's not empathy; that's submission. Empathy is more of a mindset that guides the interaction and ultimate action or policy, rather than blind acquiescence.

Being an empathetic organization also does not mean accepting a weak place in the market. Yes, you can be empathetic *and* competitive. In fact, companies that keep empathy top of mind are capable of building more robust brands than those who ignore it. Quality messaging is imbued with empathy. It projects the impression that the entity selling goods or services thoroughly understands your emotions, needs, and desires as a consumer. Empathy-focused brands are capable

of forging strong, lasting relationships with their customers; relationships that translate into hard dollars and strong results, as we saw through the story of Christina Harbridge’s compassionate collection agency.

## **Better Than Gold: The Platinum Rule**

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We often think of empathy as the Golden Rule: *do unto others as you would have done unto you*. That’s compassionate, right? But here’s the problem: not everyone thinks or feels the way you do. We all come at situations with different experiences, baggage, and perspectives. Treating others how we’d like to be treated means assuming our own preferences are universal. Not a good plan.

Belinda Parmar—founder and CEO of The Empathy Business and creator of the Global Empathy Index—sums this up beautifully: “If you treat others like *you* want to be treated, your frame of reference is yourself.”

A better way to act with empathy is to follow what has become known as the Platinum Rule: *Treat others as they want to be treated*. Flipping the old version of this rule forces you to see things from the other person’s point of view and *then* choose the right course of action—the definition of empathy we’re talking about here.

In *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, Daniel H. Pink shatters the old myths about the best ways to spark stellar performance. While one-size-fits-all “carrot and stick” approaches made work more efficient decades ago, the complexities of modern economies and required skills of the current century require new motivators. Great thinkers like Abraham Maslow questioned the assumption that all humans respond to stimuli in the same way. Pink cites research and

case studies throughout *Drive* that support this, showing how motivators differ for different types of people, and that the same rewards—for example, increased pay—do not always motivate everyone in the same way. In some surprising instances, providing financial rewards can actually backfire. For intrinsically motivated, creative thinkers, autonomy, mastery, and purpose are far more effective motivators, which can have startling productivity and business benefits when employed in the right way.

## **Empathy Overwhelm**

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There's a human tendency to think that if we can't help everyone or create a big enough dent in the problem, we shouldn't even try. This is a counterproductive way to look at large-scale challenges, and one that experts deem a false sense of inefficacy, or *pseudo inefficacy*. It ignores the snowball effect of small actions and provides an easy excuse for shirking responsibility. Organizations can still do the right thing for a large portion of their employees and customers even if they can't help everyone.

Paul Slovic is a psychologist at the University of Oregon, and for decades he's been asking why the world often ignores mass suffering or atrocities. Slovic's work has shown that the human mind is not very good at thinking about, and empathizing with, millions or billions of individuals. His findings show that when the number is too large, we tend to dehumanize people and don't feel anything toward their specific situation, what Slovic calls *psychic numbing*.

I believe that this happens to many of us, either as entrepreneurs or as part of a larger organization. Business owners or sole proprietors (solopreneurs) can often feel that they have to

“play the game” as it’s written in order to succeed, leaving no room for empathy or human connection. Trying to change the way business gets done in their industry is too daunting of a task to take on, or they feel like their individual efforts as a small business owner won’t cause seismic shifts in cultural business norms. That’s why when we hear about renegades such as Richard Branson, Arianna Huffington, or Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines shattering business norms, it’s incredibly inspiring. On the other end of the employment spectrum, people who are one of thousands of workers within a larger corporation often feel powerless to improve an entrenched culture that rewards cutthroat competition over collaboration or one in which they can’t bring their whole selves to work for fear of being misunderstood. They see an immovable behemoth in front of them. It’s a David versus Goliath situation, and the best course of self-preservation is often to leave rather than try to change the organization from within.

BUT THIS BOOK will hopefully give you the tools and practices to make change from wherever you stand. Changing our mindsets in business can spill over into the larger culture. You are going to meet some innovative companies and leaders in this book who are already doing this work and fighting this fight.

In Part II, I’ll show you how leaders can adopt a more empathetic mindset to manage their workplaces and lead their teams in a way that engenders loyalty, productivity, and peak performance. We’ll explore rituals and practices to help you strengthen your empathy muscles to get the best out of the people around you—even if you don’t identify as a particularly empathetic person. Creating a workplace culture with established practices that reinforce empathetic action can actually make you more empathetic. Psychologist Susan Spinrad Esterly states from her experience working with patients,

“I can tell you that people who are autistic or on the spectrum and have difficulty with social cues can get a ton of help if they work on having rote lists of things that empathetic people do and try them out. Even if it isn’t initially coming from a genuine place, the positive reinforcement is cyclical. Through time and positive reinforcement, the rote behaviors become ingrained and integrated.” Basically, if you start doing the actions, this can lead to fundamental changes within you. She also says, “If people start changing what they do or if entities start changing what they do, they will start getting different feedback from the world.”

In Part III, I’ll describe empathetic workplace cultures to show you how companies can work from the inside out—on their culture and processes—to adopt and exhibit compassionate behaviors that, in turn, infuse the external brand. If you believe your organization could never, ever change its existing culture, consider this: organizational processes are made by humans and, therefore, can be changed and improved. Even a soft skill such as empathy can be codified and rewarded to encourage adoption, regardless of people’s moods or emotional capacity. Slovic talks about this idea of creating processes and policies to account for human emotions, saying, “It’s like the income tax system: we don’t leave it to individuals’ feelings of how much they think they should pay to the government for the services they receive . . . We don’t leave it to people’s feelings of loyalty and obligation; we couldn’t. I think it’s the same thing with these moral crises—when you think carefully and you realize the scale, you have to create laws and institutions that are not sensitive to the feelings of the moment.”

Effective leadership and workplace culture come together to create fertile soil where people’s innate empathy can take root. Creating this environment allows an organization’s

external brand to be believed as more empathetic. This crucial outward perception is what helps the organization differentiate, attract more customers, and inspire loyalty and referrals. In Part IV, we'll look at how to build an empathetic external brand and discuss the resulting benefits. We'll explore the various ways to embed empathy into the DNA of your organization so that it is authentic and real.

But first, let's dive into the ways that cultivating empathy within your own organization can help you grow and prosper.

## Sharpen Your Empathy Edge

- *Empathy* is about putting yourself in someone else's shoes and understanding their emotional state because you have experienced something similar, or can imagine what life is like for them. It differs from *sympathy*, which is an acknowledgment of someone's emotional hardship, and *compassion*, which is empathy in action.
- *Emotional empathy* means you feel how the other person feels, full stop. *Cognitive empathy* means you understand how another person sees the world.
- Being empathetic doesn't negate your ability to make a rational, reasoned business decision.
- Being an empathetic organization or leader does not mean caving to demands. Empathy is a mindset that guides the interaction and ultimate action or policy, rather than blind acquiescence.
- Being an empathetic organization does not mean accepting a weak place in the market. Yes, you can be empathetic and competitive.
- In all dealings, endeavor to follow the Platinum Rule: treat others as *they* want to be treated.

