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Empathy: Demand is up but supply down

Empathy is a skill no machine can duplicate, one that leads to better business

Sonya Dutta Choudhury

Two years ago, Siddharth Maskeri suddenly lost his job at the animation company he worked at. "Overnight my boss closed down the unit we were working in. He told the 10 of us working there that we were not productive enough," says the then 38-year-old, NCR-based Maskeri was paying loan instalments on his house and his car, and had a household to support. He felt frustrated and betrayed by his employer. Yet, he stepped back, took a pause, and made an effort to be empathetic. "It's easy to make someone a villain when what they do conflicts with your desires. But when I spoke to people around, I discovered from the accountant that the unit had been doing badly for a while, and my boss had been fighting to save it. He had just not told us how serious the issue was earlier," says Maskeri, who later wrote a letter of support to his boss, empathizing with his situation.

DESPERATE FOR EMPATHY

Empathy, or the ability to understand the world of another, is a very human trait. It has been one of the most potent forces in evolution, says Geoff Colvin, author of *Humans are Underrated*. It is also the most critical skill for the future workplace, he explains.

It is a skill no machine can duplicate, one that leads to better business, higher levels of customer satisfaction, better communication and collaboration. Being good at it improves your whole life; it helps you read people better, get along with them better, persuade them more effectively and to be less socially anxious.

"Empathy also fosters creativity when it comes to understanding the user and consumer. There's the famous story of the engineer, who redesigned the MRI scan room to make it less scary for children because he was able to empathize with the children and see



Siddharth Maskeri says being empathetic to his former boss helped him eventually to get an idea for a new business.

the process through their eyes," says Soundari Mukherjee, co-founder of Tyameve Solutions, a Hong Kong- and India-based learning solutions firm. The company uses empathy training in their programmes in customer service, in leadership and more recently, in diversity and inclusion programmes, where empathy helps understand unconscious biases.

Using empathy for creativity became part of Maskeri's new venture, a story-telling company Souliify, as well. Here Maskeri's efforts at empathy with his former boss paid unexpected dividends when the man who laid him off became one of his first clients.

Creativity, better decision-making, greater motivation—if all these are the much touted benefits of empathy, why is it a quality that's so hard to find?

"The diminishing lack of empathy is because as a society, we are driven by our deliverables, with not enough time to achieve them," says Anna Chandry, Bengaluru-based transactional therapist and chairperson of the Live Laugh Foundation.

The consequences of such a situation can be grave for an organization, says Chandry. "People at work who feel unfairly judged spend all their psychological energy trying to make themselves understood. They are constantly trying to give the impression they are working, instead of actually working. There will be less cooperation and collaboration in the entire organization, which will obviously be very detrimental in getting things done," she adds.

The skills we need are withering because of stress, self-absorption and

social media. "People simply spend less time in social interactions and more time socializing online, which makes it increasingly difficult to develop empathy and sharpen social skills. Like any skill, empathy comes through the quality of attention. If your attention is continually interrupted by the need to look at your smartphone, you are never really gaining a foothold in the feelings or perspectives of other people," says Robert Greene in his bestselling book *The Laws of Human Nature*.

If you are looking to ramp up your empathy quotient, below are seven ways that can help.

Sonya Dutta Choudhury is the author of *Career Rules: How to Choose Right and Get the Life You Want*.

7 ways to bring back empathy

Meet face-to-face: "Having an in-person conversation is such an intense, fully engaging experience that it builds our highest mental capabilities," says author Geoff Colvin. Take the time to talk rather than text, and meet face-to-face because virtual interactions don't have the richness of a face-to-face meeting.

Listen carefully: Try reversing your normal impulse to talk and give your opinion. Instead, listen carefully. Look beyond words to expressions, body language and the tone of voice in order to be able to understand the other person's moods and motivations, says Anna Chandry.

Suspend judgement: Don't assume that other people are similar to you or that they share your values. Listen without passing judgement, says Chandry.

Mirror emotion: Make empathetic connections with people by mirror-

ing them. Nod, smile, mimic gestures and postures in a subtle way to help establish a rapport with the person you are talking to, advises Robert Greene.

Gather information: Ask more questions to understand other people and what makes them what they are. These could be situation specific or could be more general. Ask people about their early years and their relationship to their parents and siblings, says Greene. This helps get a read on people's values, which are mostly established in their earliest years.

Take action: "Empathy may be displayed in words and in actions. When you just use words to convey empathy and that is not followed through by action, you will come across as fake. For example, in a customer service scenario, the first step would be to listen carefully and then respond after acknowledging the mental state



Learn to listen carefully to others without being judgemental.

and the issue, with action," says Soundari Mukherjee.

Use story-telling: Reading fiction and storytelling creates empathy. Immerse yourself in the characters of a story to let go of preconceptions, to

be alive in the moment, and to continually adapt your ideas about people. Siddharth Maskeri says he asks participants to tell their own stories to the group and listen to their colleagues' stories.



Piyush Mathur believes mornings offer quality, gadget-free time.

For quality, uninterrupted me-only time, get up early

Kavita Devgan

Piyush Mathur is an early riser irrespective of time, place or situation. He manages to beat the alarm on most days and stops it way before it's scheduled to ring at 5.10am. Mathur, 34, who is based in Gurugram, is the chairman and founder of Hielo Beverages India Pvt. Ltd, which makes premium range of beverages under the Pear brand name.

Early school reporting and active participation in NCC (National Cadet Corps), swimming and other outdoor activities made him an early riser right from his childhood days. The morning vibe fills him with positivity, and waking up early helps him think clearly, says Mathur. It helps him to establish his vision and mission for the day, thus helping him set actionable goals.

Mathur uses early morning hours in different ways. Sometimes he cycles (not when it's really cold and windy), surfs the internet, goes on a long drive as it helps him think better, chats with old friends who are early risers like him, or updates his knowledge on the latest happening in the technology world and their practical applications.

"I like to indulge in different activities everyday as this expands the scope of learning. I am a curious person by nature, and find it very monotonous to do the same stuff every morning," he says.

On some days, Mathur just goes walking as he believes that this re-energizes him and helps him evolve better strategies. "An empty head (in the mornings) is the best time to take decisions and turning ideas into doable plans that have a better scope to turn real," he says. He believes that this is "I, me, my time," and he must spend it minus any agenda. "My only intention is to rejuvenate, learn, relax, and just be happy in the morning. As that makes for a happy day ahead," he says.

The payback

Mathur believes that self-improvisation

and self-criticism are the best tutors in life. "Early morning sunlight is the best gift you can give yourself. This is my quality and gadget-free time. It puts me in the right frame of mind for the day ahead," he says. "Not only do I gain an hour or two's advantage over colleagues, this quiet time is the most productive during the day. Without interruptions, I am able to plan and spend some quality time on my top priorities. For me, the heavy thinking and processing comes in these quiet hours," he says.

This especially comes in handy on days where the meetings stack up back-to-back as it gives him that initial think-time to prepare and organize for the day ahead. Waking up early also helps Mathur spend some time with his four-year-old daughter whose school bus arrives at 6.30am.

Morning ritual

Mathur says the first thing he does every morning is jot down the short-term goals for the day. Running a business is a challenge, so one must learn the art to convert weaknesses into strengths. A thought well-planned early in the day is a thought well-executed through the course of the day.

So, Mathur starts his day by checking his social media updates, browses through his emails and replies to the texts that he missed responding to the day before.

He also reads his newspapers every morning, a childhood habit that has stuck on.

The waking hours

Mathur gets inspired from a lot of people who start their day early. His father was an early riser and watching him made Mathur an early riser too.

"I have also crossed paths with many winners from all walks of life and they are all morning people too. Waking up early, I feel, is a habit worth developing, as the payback is amazing," he says.

The Morning Diary is a series where leaders tell us how waking up early has made a positive impact.

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ELEVATE YOUR TRAVEL
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While I have been battling sky high airfares over the past few weeks, trying to get to meetings for ₹5,000 but paying ₹15,000 instead, I've come to a conclusion: Last minute airfares are not going to be cheaper any longer. So, I am here to remind you to book that summer vacation now, or risk paying more when the day arrives, and your bags are packed.

I'm sure you all know a thing or two about picking your destination and finding your way around there. It could be in the Swiss Alps or the valley of Kashmir, but what about where will you stay? As a business traveller for over 15 years, I've become used to a certain minimum level of hospitality when I travel, and I certainly cannot live without the basics.

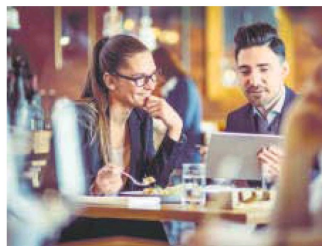
sometimes, Shangri-La, my favourite luxury brand, only has 100 hotels globally, two in India and two in Sri Lanka, but they are a class apart when it comes to luxury.

I've long advised friends and family to book directly with the hotel of your choice, or with a trusted travel adviser, to get the most satisfactory outcome for our stay. You may land yourself one of the hotel's promotional offers, like stay two nights get one free. Many hotel chains also offer their loyalty programme members anything between 5-20% discounts for booking directly.

To give you an example, I'm heading to South-East Asia this summer to meet friends coming from all over the world. Everyone had different requirements. Some wanted to be near the beach, others near the market. Some wanted a baby crib, others wanted breakfast inclusive rates. Because we reached out to the hotel directly, we could get a 20% cheaper rate than their own website, and as a sweetener they added breakfast for everyone. It, of course, helped that we were booking nine rooms.

A lot of hotel chains have over the years made it mandatory for online travel agents to match their prices, so they cannot undercut the brand anymore. When you book a hotel directly, it saves you the hassle of having to pay upfront, but also provides you with the privilege to earn points for your hotel stays as well.

On the other hand, if you have earned points through your



Check if a hotel has curated partnerships with travel agencies for added perks for their guests.

35,000 Bonvoy points a night as compared to ₹20,000 upwards a night in cash.

Frequently, we overlook the fact that various credit card com-

and redeem them for a free stay.

For luxury holidays, another mode to get a great value for your hotel stays is your bank and trusted travel advisers. American Express has Fine Hotels and Resorts (FHR), which offers perks at over 1,000 carefully curated hotels globally. These include room upgrades upon arrival, daily breakfast inclusive, and unique amenities from the property. For instance, at the Ritz-Carlton Bengaluru, you get \$100 to spend at the property, while the Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur will host your dinners during your stay.

When you book a hotel directly, it saves you the hassle of having to pay upfront and you can earn privilege points

Similarly, individual hotel chains have their own curated partnerships as well for travel agents. Shangri-La has The Luxury Circle, and Hyatt has Privé, where participating travel agents can book hotel stays for their members at the same price as the best available rates, but give perks similar to the Amex FHR programme.

Business travel is no fun, but the perks you get courtesy your days on the road can win you brownie points with your friends and family on your vacations.