Empathy: Seeing through the Lens of Others

*Empathy - the ability to identify with and care about others by seeing and understanding the world through their eyes.*

Serving the customer is the sole reason a business exists. The success equation is pretty simple: No customers, no business. On the other hand, when organizations meet or exceed customer expectations, the business grows. Empathy, understanding the views and needs of others from their perspective, is therefore a critical skill for business (and also personal) growth and success.

In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, George Orwell describes the misery, hopelessness and despair of the late 1920s poorest. What is interesting is that Orwell does not write about poverty as a research observer. The account is based on his own personal experience as he chose to live among the poor and suffer the consequences of starvation and social ostracism. He was able to express the reality of poverty because he submerged himself into the experience of others and literally walked in their (tattered) shoes.

Empathy is the skill that allows us to take that walk and view the world through the eyes of others. It permits us to pause from our own biases to see situations through the lens of someone else’s experiences, emotions and concerns.

If you’re thinking empathy is a “soft” relational concept, think again. The ability to experience the world from the point of view of teammates, customers and society is fast becoming integral to twenty-first century business success. Certainly empathy drives intimacy and understanding within family relationships. Every loved one wants those closest to them to understand their world. But take that concept to the next level. A basic communication principle is to know your audience. If you want to inspire people to action with your message, then you have to submerge yourself in their mindset, motivation and passions. Ideas, services and products are purchased based upon what the customer wants—not what the spokesperson, provider or manufacturer thinks is important. The skill of empathy is foundational to identifying customers’ needs and desires.

Let's look at some current examples. Companies like Zappos and Nordstrom command higher price points because they deliver exceptional customer experiences. Starbucks sells coffee at amazing profit margins precisely because each customer gets exactly what they want – including extra-hot and extra-shot. Newer products like GoPro, Motorola Moto X and Spotify have soared because they allow customers to create personalized movies, customized phones and tailored music to fit individualized tastes. Even hardcore science is moving in this direction. We’re thrilled that some of Blueprint...
LEADERSHIP’s very own customers are leading the change in determining personalized cancer treatments based on a patient’s unique genetic DNA sequencing.

It is inevitable. Customization and personalization of messages and services are moving at an accelerating pace and this promises to continue. To truly understand the customer’s perspective, leaders across all industries and spheres of society must develop and grow their empathetic muscle.

Not only will non-empathetic companies lose customer allegiance, but social media will continue to drive customers away with negative reviews that spread virally in today’s world. Negative social media feedback marginalizes companies like Bank of America and American Airlines, known for some of the worst customer experiences in the marketplace. To prevent such experiences, customer empathy must be driven from the C-Suite down throughout an organization’s culture. While some may debate whether the “customer is always right,” the customer certainly has abundant opportunities to share their view quickly across the globe. Empathy helps organizations stay in touch with the needs, views and experiences of customers.

Empathy is also important to justice and social revolution. For example, in order to foster peace and implement change, we must empathize with the perspectives of those on opposing sides of politics and upcoming generations, especially when it comes to issues regarding environmental and economic stability, immigration, and educational opportunity. If we only see through our own eyes and experiences, we will miss the opportunity to see the world in a broader sense, as George Orwell did.

In applying empathetic skills to every aspect of our life (relationships, work, and society), we promote other-centeredness and demote narrow-mindedness, a shift our world desperately needs. By evaluating our companies in the context of how we are impacting our teammates, customers, and the world at large, we position ourselves to make a lasting impact, not just in our own companies or homes, but across state and national borders.

The opportunity to see the world through another’s eyes should not be viewed as a soft concept, but rather as one of the most valuable and effective skills in serving the world. The 21st Century competitive advantage will go to organizational teams that work together interdependently to generate positive and caring experiences for the customer and society at large. By choosing to live in the shoes of others, we break ground in building a better world for our families and our customers in generations to come.