

Not Getting the Support or Buy-In You Want? Try a little empathy!

By Manya Arond-Thomas

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Manya Arond-Thomas
manya@arond-thomas.com

Manya Arond-Thomas & Company <http://www.arond-thomas.com>

"It's not who is right, but what is right, that is of importance."

Thomas Huxley

"An open ear is the only believable sign of an open heart."

David Augsburg

"A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."
Albert Einstein

As someone who's always been interested in and curious about the "soft skills" that make individuals, groups, and teams particularly effective, it seems to me that empathy has gotten short shrift in terms of just how powerful a capability it is in influencing people, building relationships, getting buy-in and motivation, and creating resilience both personally and in systems. I've also been bemused by the irony of that expression, as the soft stuff is the hard stuff for many of us!

In working with an executive coaching client recently, I was asked to conduct some interviews

for 360 feedback, and was struck by the importance her peers and bosses placed on her being able to understand and hold her customers' perspectives.

In fact, without actually using the word "empathy", a number of the interviewees indicated it was a key success factor if my client wants to be more effective in her leadership and influence, even though she is already perceived as a very caring, people-competent director.

So what are we talking about exactly? The American Heritage Dictionary defines empathy as "Understanding so intimate that the feelings, thoughts, and motives of one are readily comprehended by another."

In the emotional intelligence lexicon, empathy is the core, critical competence of social awareness. In this context, particularly as it applies to business performance and organizations, empathy is the ability to understand other people, to take other and multiple perspectives.

It is based in taking an active interest in others' concerns. The ability to be empathic reflects increasing complexity of perspective and depth of understanding of others, and thus is critical for effective leadership.

Our natural tendency to see the world as we are rather than as things are limits our abilities to connect with others and to make more appropriate or effective choices based on what's right for the whole – be it a team, the organization, customers, or business partners. If we are not empathic to our colleagues, customers, and clients' perspectives, we will not be effective in selling our ideas, programs, and products.

Likewise, some organizational cultures value and foster empathy more than others. At one point, I coached in a Fortune 100 company where a command and control management style predominated. Empathy was dismissed as a sign of weakness and management failed to see the power it held in driving motivation and performance, and achieving results.

Another reason people are cautious about demonstrating empathy is a fear that if I show that I understand, care about, and acknowledge the other person's reality that means that I agree

with them, and therefore I weaken my interests. However, acknowledging another's perspective and taking it into account, does not imply or mean that we have to agree with them.

While some folks are naturally hard wired to be empathic, anyone can develop empathy behaviors. How do you do that?

- Practice listening when someone approaches you to talk and express feelings if you would typically feel too busy to talk and brush them off.
- Try using open-ended inquiry, such as "tell me more about that" to make sure you understand the other person's point of view and their motivation, both in emotion and content.
- Be aware of your ability to adjust your style and approach based on the needs and style you are working with., not only verbally but also in para-language such as tone, pitch, volume and pace, non-verbal body language, and dress.

Be aware that even those of us who are more naturally empathic can fail to demonstrate this ability, when we're dealing with something that we have an emotional charge or investment in.

A final safety tip: If you want to demonstrate or develop empathy and experience its' potential power, you must necessarily let go of the need and desire to be right, even if you feel and believe passionately in your idea or position. Being right and being empathically curious just don't go together.

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Manya Arond-Thomas, M.D., is the founder of Manya Arond-Thomas & Company, a coaching and consulting firm that catalyzes the creation of "right results" through facilitating executive development, high-performance teams and organizational effectiveness. She can be reached at (734) 480-1932 or e-mailed at <mailto:manya@arond-thomas.com>
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mailto:manya_list@aweber.com

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