

# When Empathy Is Bad for Business

By DIANNA BOOHER APRIL 7, 2021



If you've ever watched TV coverage after a crazed killer has gunned down innocent victims in a shooting rampage and felt your own muscles tighten as grieving family members spoke of the horror, that's empathy. If you've been concerned about those losing their jobs or their family business because of pandemic shutdowns, then you have empathy.

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opportunity to influence others. That's because they know you have their best interest in mind.

## But Empathy Doesn't Necessarily Lead to the Best Outcome

Yes, yes, I know that we hear clamoring from all directions that leaders, organizations, and politicians need to have more empathy in these tough times of Covid, financial calamity, and unusual working conditions.

But empathy *doesn't* necessarily mean that you can influence someone for the long-term -- nor lead them to the best outcome. Nor does having empathy mean that you even know what the best outcome might be — for them or for you and your business.

In fact, research studies done at Northwestern University, INSEAD, Saint Mary's University, and Dartmouth College suggest that *it's better to get inside someone's head than inside their heart*. Perspective-taking will make you more persuasive and a better negotiator than empathy will.

Consider why that might be...

## Empathetic People May Be Limited by Their Emotions

Empathetic people may become ruled — and thereby limited — by their emotions. They find it difficult to step outside their biased views. So they often go beyond the “norms” of what's fair to give preferential treatment to someone they feel compassion for — even giving up their own rights and goals.

You've seen situations like this yourself: A manager gives a poor performer a third, fourth, fifth, and even more chances to change a bad attitude simply because they have empathy for the employee. And in the meantime, the poor-performing employee may destroy the morale and productivity of everyone in the department.

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entire department.

Consider another example: A sales rep with empathy -- but limited perspective -- finds herself identifying with every difficult situation clients tell her. So all too frequently, the sales rep takes advantage of the flexibility her manager has given her in quoting pricing for bulk orders. Because she feels empathetic to the client's tough situation, she often offers a deep discount and gives away much of her company's profit margin.

## How the Right Perspective Pays Off in the Long Term

A person with perspective has self-confidence. They're not looking for approval from others. Neither are they looking at situations necessarily for how things affect them personally. Their attempt to pause and take perspective doesn't mean that they don't have biases. Rather, it means that they *know* they have biases but refuse to let those biases limit them. They can step outside those biases and take an objective look at what's fair and reasonable in various situations.

For example, consider coaches and fans at a sporting event. I'm remembering my high-school basketball days, playing for Coach Wimbish.

Let's say Team A has an empathetic coach. If the referee makes a few bad calls that result in his team falling behind, the coach may begin to empathize with his players. He may encourage them to "get even" and do whatever it takes as long as they don't get a penalty. Shoving. Elbowing. Tripping. Holding the jersey. He and the team may get angrier as the game goes on and they fall further behind.

At the next bad call by the referees, the players become even more demoralized. The coach steps out on the court, yells at the official, gets thrown out of the game, and earns another penalty. Team A eventually loses the game.

By contrast, our Coach Wimbish always had the ability to take perspective in a game with inexperienced officials making bad calls. She could step outside her emotional upset and assess the situation.

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*rigged. These are just inexperienced officials. What my players need now is something to reduce the frustration of bad officiating. I'll refocus them on executing plays with precision just like we do in practice.*

With this perspective, Coach Wimbish had a much stronger chance of “settling us down” and influencing us toward a better outcome. (Not saying we always won! But we did play better when not frustrated and focused on “getting even.”)

So what's the key to perspective at work and in your personal life? Listening. Evaluating. Assessing.

Empathy builds relationships. Perspective keeps them working as planned.



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Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 49 books, published in 62 foreign-language editions. She helps organizations to communicate clearly and leaders to expand their influence by a strong executive presence — and often by their own published book. Her latest books include *Faster, Fewer, Better Emails*; *Communicate Like a Leader*; *What MORE Can I Say?*; *Creating Personal Presence*; and *Communicate With Confidence*. National Media such as *Good Morning America*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street*

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