

The game-changing skill in customer experience



Empathy

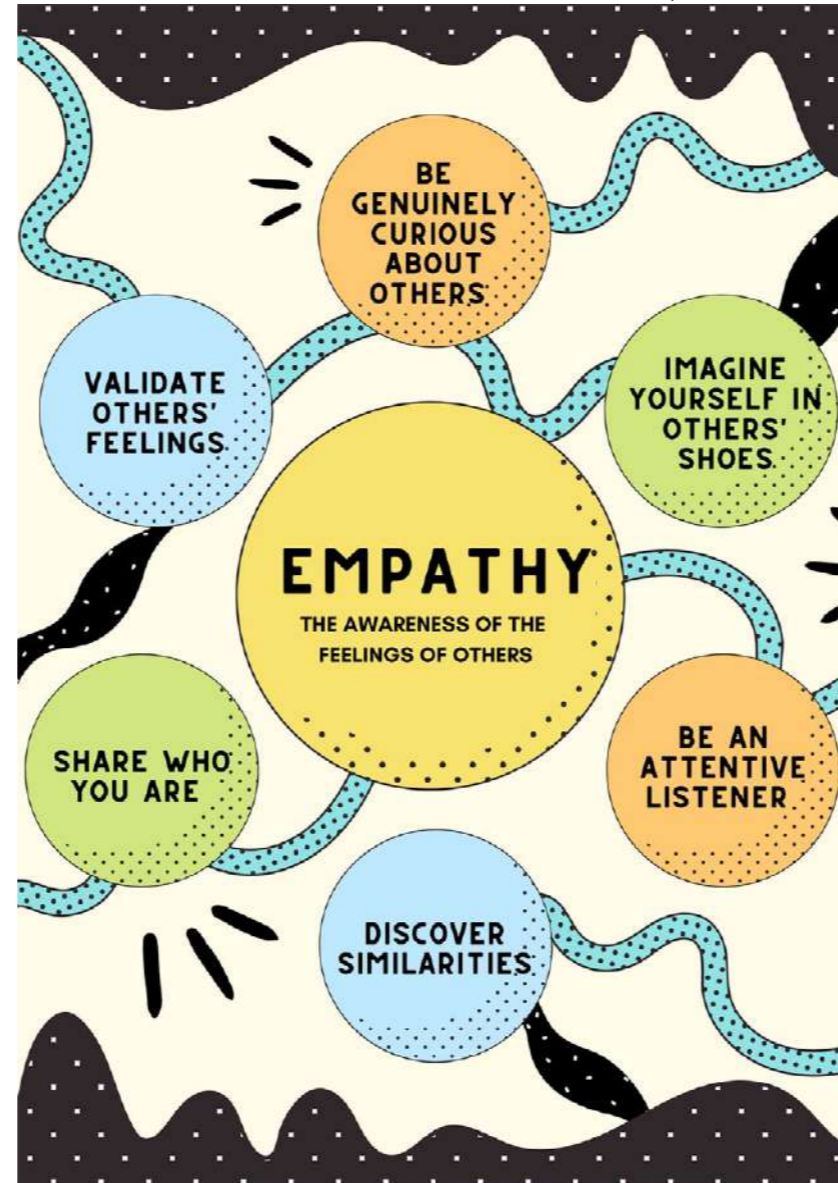
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Empathy is a key differentiator in creating exceptional customer experiences in an increasingly tech-driven business world. Labelled a 'soft skill', it's a complex trait to develop that requires self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and ongoing development. Despite its complexity, empathy can be taught and, when leveraged effectively, becomes a game changer in both customer experience (CX) and employee engagement.

Empathy is more than just "Walking in their shoes"

The metaphor "to walk in someone else's shoes" oversimplifies the multifaceted process of empathy, which goes beyond a surface-level understanding of someone's situation. To truly empathise with a customer, employees must detach themselves momentarily from their own emotional triggers, responses and biases. At the same time, they must consider the context of the content and behaviour and respond in

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a way that connects with and validates the customer's emotional needs. Empathy requires a high degree of emotional self-awareness that enables individuals to regulate their own responses more effectively, allowing for authentic empathetic engagement with customers.



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CASE STUDY: Empathy in action

Consider the customer experience when a new bank card is issued. The bank's process entails automatically re-issuing the card to the courier responsible for delivering the card to the customer. However, when the contact details available to the courier company are outdated and incorrect, a significant delay prompts a call to the bank.

NO EMPATHY

The customer service agent responds to the query without empathy

In this case, the agent's response would confirm the normal process for re-issuing the card, and that the card is no longer in possession of the bank. The only option available is for the customer to reach out to the couriers directly. Falling back to process or compliance fails to address the customer's dilemma. The agent follows the correct route to addressing the problem. However, the real problem is not resolved. The customer's needs are dismissed, the ownership of the bank is relegated and more effort is transferred to the customer to resolve the matter.



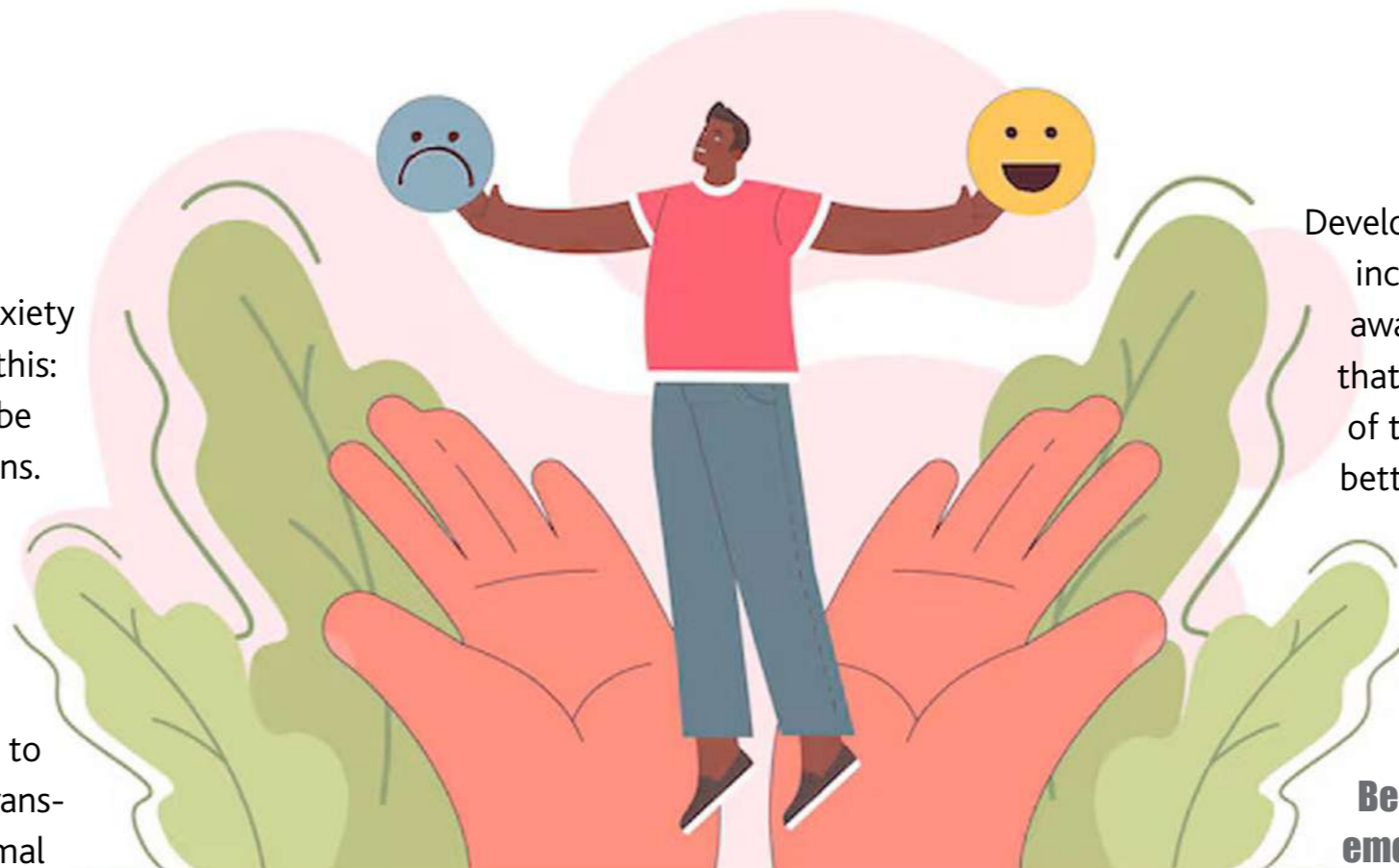
EMPATHY**The customer service agent responds with empathy**

When the customer's dilemma and anxiety are acknowledged, it could sound like this: "I understand how stressful this must be to be unable to process any transactions. Let me call the couriers while you are on the line to find out where the card is at the moment".

Empathy is demonstrated by relating to what it must be like without access to a bank card and unable to make any transactions, and appreciating that the normal process failed the customer. It also implies the appreciation of the unique situation of the agent to access the right resources and brokering the resolution to remove the customer's effort.

Although the delivery timeframe of the card may remain the same, an empathetic interaction and emotional reassurance offered could have dramatically changed the customer's perception of the brand.

This small but crucial shift in interaction can help defuse tense situations, as Harvard Business Review reports that customers who feel their emotions are acknowledged during an interaction are more likely to be loyal and provide positive feedback, even when their issue isn't fully resolved.



Developing empathy skills requires increasing an employee's self-awareness. Neuroscience shows that when people are conscious of their emotions, they can better regulate their responses and engage more empathetically with others. In this context, the following steps to mastery of empathy, are important.

Becoming aware of one's own emotions.

Being able to identify one's own emotions, especially

universally identified emotions like frustration, anger, fear, anxiety, happiness or joy is essential. All humans experience these emotions at some point. Using inherent wisdom to identify these core emotions is the first step to cultivating empathy.

Identify, articulate and respond to other's emotions.

Like the internal process, mastering strategies to identify these universal emotions in others is the next step.

Articulate the observation in simple language.

'I can only imagine how frustrated you are by now' and consider what they need as a result [remove obstacles]. This demonstrates the ability to 'hear' others. Processing the information and deciphering universal human needs hold the key to navigating the conversation to a human-centred response.

The science behind empathy

Empathy is not just an innate skill, but a neurologically driven process that can be fine-tuned. The amygdala – the brain's emotional response centre – triggers our fight, flight, or freeze reactions when confronted with stress.

Without self-awareness, employees subconsciously fall back on default responses to protect themselves in the face of potential threats. These responses could include the fear of consequences should they not act in a perceived compliant manner.

The easiest way to avoid the threat is to fall back on the 'safe' and compliant process when confronted with discomfort or dilemmas. This lack of flexibility often prevents them from connecting with the customer on an emotional level.

Is there a link between under-developed interpersonal skills and tech-savvy Gen Z?

A Deloitte study created an informative picture of Gen Z and its skill with technology – smartphones, tablets, laptops, social media and video calling.

The same Deloitte report points out though that Gen Z is concerned about their ability to communicate and forge strong interpersonal relationships, because technology has impaired their cognitive skill development, and they recognise that their skills like critical thinking, empathy and interpersonal communication, are weak.

At the same time, many Gen Z will find themselves starting their working careers in the service sector. The key question for every business leader is whether their younger, front-line Gen Z employees can demonstrate empathy, good (human) communication and problem-solving skills?

The business value of empathy

Businesses will need to invest significantly into training and development of the interpersonal communication and empathy skills of their people – or risk being left with a workforce poorly equipped to drive lasting success on the customer experience front.

Empathy training for employees is good for customer and employee experience. Research from the Journal of Service Research shows that customers are 60% more likely to become repeat buyers when they feel understood by a company.



Furthermore, empathy training boosts employee confidence in handling complex situations, leading to higher job satisfaction and lower burnout rates. Employees equipped with empathy can defuse tensions quickly, they manage conversations more thoughtfully, without resorting to rigid process adherence, and instead prioritise human connection.

Empathy also has a direct impact on the bottom line. Deloitte found that companies leading in empathy not only outperform their competitors but also experience greater customer loyalty and employee retention. In an age where service delivery is becoming increasingly automated and robotic, empathy remains a distinctly human advantage.

Empathy is a game-changer in CX

Empathy empowers employees to connect with customers on an emotional level, diffuse challenging situations, and build stronger relationships.

For organisations, investing in empathy training doesn't just improve service delivery; it creates a culture where employees feel more confident, valued, and capable of making a difference.

As businesses strive to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive market, empathy remains one of the most underutilised, yet powerful tools available.

According to a report in Harvard Business Review by Alan Zorfias and Daniel Leemon, emotional connection matters more than satisfaction:

"On a lifetime value basis, emotionally connected customers are more than twice as valuable as highly satisfied customers.

"These emotionally connected customers buy more of your products and services, visit you more often, exhibit less price sensitivity, pay more attention to your communications, follow your advice, and recommend you more – everything you hope their experience with you will cause them to do.

"Companies deploying emotional-connection-based strategies and metrics to design, prioritise, and measure the customer experience find that increasing customers' emotional connection drives significant improvements in financial outcomes."

Customer empathy ultimately comes down to the actions a company takes every day to ensure each customer feels heard, understood, and valued. Understanding the impact of customer empathy will set you apart from the competition, strengthen your connections with customers, and ultimately boost your bottom line. **SR**

