

Stop Talking About Empathy, and Start Acting On It

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During my last full-time job as an executive leader, my colleagues and I were asked to stand in front of the entire company and talk about which of the organization's corporate values resonated with us the most. Our choices: self-awareness, positive energy, judgment, intellectual honesty, and empathy. These values, along with others like integrity, courage, passion, and fun, might look familiar. They're the list of company values taped up in corner offices and corridors around the world, even if most employees never know they exist.

"Empathy," said the woman two seats down from me. "Because people say I'm good at connecting with other people." Several nods from the crowd of supportive employees. "Empathy," said the guy next to her, one seat down from me. "I care about other people, and do my best to treat them as I want to be treated." More nods, and a few spontaneous claps. "Intellectual honesty," I said. "Because I'm pretty good at cutting through the bullshit." I got a few smiles and nervous laughs but was mostly met with bewildered silence. I think I was supposed to say "empathy," but I couldn't bring myself to do it. As a branding and leadership executive, with a background as an academic psychologist, maybe I knew a little too much about what the word *empathy* means. Or, rather, how it can mean so many different things—yet absolutely nothing—at the same time.

For a word that didn't exist in the English language until the 20th century, *empathy* has emerged as a linguistic superstar. Since 2004, Google searches for the word have risen steadily, with frequency more than doubling over the past decade alone. With the explosion of the global coronavirus pandemic—along with escalated racial tensions—*empathy* has embedded itself in the public discourse, often with reference to which political leaders have demonstrated it and which have not.

Outside the political ring, corporations, big and small, have become downright *obsessed* with empathy. Some leaders, like Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, have a long track record of touting empathy as a central guiding force. “There is no way we are going to be able to succeed...if we don't have a deep sense of empathy,” he has said. More recently, multiple news organizations heralded Airbnb's CEO Brian Chesky as empathetic for the way in which he communicated staff layoffs due to COVID-19. “I have a deep feeling of love for all of you,” he wrote in an internal company memo. Leaders understand that this is good for business. A recent poll from Ipsos (on behalf of PepsiCo Beverages North America) reports that how brands respond to the coronavirus pandemic will impact shopping intentions of more than half of Americans, and that Americans see it as more important now for businesses “to demonstrate empathetic qualities.”

This all makes intuitive sense. Like puppies and rainbows, empathy is one of those things that seem like a pure, absolute positive. As professor Paul Bloom jokes in his book *Against Empathy*, “You can never be too rich or too thin...or too empathetic.” From my perspective, though, too much is lacking from this empathy discourse. As I felt when I stood in front of that room to talk about my favorite corporate value, I still don't know exactly what everyone is talking about. Empathy sounds good, but how are we defining it? Empathy is ubiquitous, but are all businesses talking about the same thing? Does being an empathetic organization mean taking an

action of some kind, or just having feelings?

In the corporate world, answers to these questions are hard to find. While empathy increasingly appears as a part of companies' mission statements, hardly any define what they actually mean by it. The overriding assumption is that the word simply speaks for itself. (Spoiler alert: It doesn't.) The issue with companies touting empathetic messages is that while it's easy to *talk* about doing good things for employees and customers, it is far more difficult to generate and sustain positive corporate *behaviors*. In the past, organizations might have gotten a pass, or even praise, for communicating empathetic messages internally and to the public. But set against the backdrop of uncertainty about the future of business, and of life in general, people are taking notice of how companies' messages match up with their actions.

There is a tremendous amount of collective anxiety about what our individual futures hold. Some authors have pointed out that this particular period of time may be bringing up feelings of grief and trauma at scale. At a time when most of us are thinking about roughly the same things and having many of the same conversations, the concept of widespread empathy is imperative. So it is no surprise that businesses, as part of our cultural fabric, are striving to be part of the conversation. Most of them use social media channels to tell us that they care about us as employees and customers, and that they are there for all of us during times of crisis. But often those messages are unsubstantiated, and the intentions behind them are frequently muddled.

What *is* becoming clear is that the risk of companies simply talking about empathy without translating those words to measurable, tangible outcomes can result in catastrophe. Study after study has shown that employees, especially younger ones, will quit to work for companies that better align with their personal values. And, similarly, customers are more than happy to spend their money elsewhere, choosing to align with

organizations that are willing to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

Empathy might be one of the most popular topics of scientific inquiry of our time. Within the past decade, Google Scholar—which indexes the full text or metadata of scholarly literature across formats and disciplines—gives nearly 600,000 citations for just the term *empathy*. Most of the academic curiosity around empathy focuses on exactly what it is and, correspondingly, how to measure it.

In their effort to make sense of the scientific characterization of empathy, social psychologist Judith Hall and research scientist Rachel Schwartz published an article in 2019 that analyzed the state of the concept across nearly 500 independent studies. What they concluded is that often the word *empathy* should be bypassed altogether because there is widespread disagreement about what it means. Instead, they argue, people should refer to what they are actually talking about, be it feeling another's feelings, reading their emotional cues, caring about others' distress, listening to their stories, or any of the other various elements that comprise the empathy laundry list. "Our point was not to find fault," write Hall and Schwartz, "but to illustrate the many ways authors attempt to deal with a construct that is essentially intractable. The challenge to theory is compounded by the fact that empathy is alternatively treated as a process, a trait, a capacity or competency, a response or reaction to observing another's experiences, and interpersonal behavior itself." In other words, the research overwhelmingly shows that it's dangerous to assume that we know exactly what anyone is talking about when they talk about empathy.

The business world is hardly clarifying things. The word is applied liberally to what companies are saying and doing,

especially as we all continue to grapple with the ambiguity that lies ahead.

Companies are blasting messages about caring about each other during uncertain times, with the common refrain that “we’re here for you” and that, above all, “we are in this together!” In response to the senseless police murder of George Floyd, along with many more, other companies are following similar templates to talk about how they “stand in solidarity,” “stand up against racism,” and “show support for the Black community.” In a viral tweet, video game writer Chris Franklin poked fun at the deep uniformity of brand messages:

“We at [Brand] are committed to fighting injustice by posting images to Twitter that express our commitment to fighting injustice. To that end, we offer this solemn white-on-black .jpeg that expresses vague solidarity with the Black community, but will quietly elide the specifics of what is wrong, what needs to change, or in what ways we will do anything about it...We hope this action encourages you to view [Brand] positively without, you know, expecting anything from us.”

Within a few minutes of spotting that tweet, I saw another from CBS telling me that they “stand in solidarity with our Black colleagues, creators, partners, and audiences and condemn all acts of racism, discrimination, and senseless acts of violence.” And another from Pixar letting me know that they “stand for inclusion.” Fantastic. But what does it *mean*?

Don’t get me wrong; some companies *are* doing more. Several organizations have committed to donating real money to fuel the fight against injustice. Walmart, as one example, announced that it will contribute \$100 million over five years to create a new center for racial equity. Others, like Ben & Jerry’s, created useful resources for employees and consumers to get involved with political movements. This is progress. Still, the vast majority of organizations seem satisfied with

lip service alone—and they do so at their own peril.

This is not the first time that corporations have found themselves in this position. The term *greenwashing* emerged in 1986, back when consumers first began gravitating toward environmentally friendly companies. The term described an organization that spends more time and money on marketing itself as eco-conscious than it actually works to minimize its environmental impact. Mega conglomerate Nestlé, for example, has faced wide-scale criticism—and a growing pile of expensive lawsuits—for contributing to human rights violations and global plastic pollution. Yet the company has spent millions marketing itself as creating positive impact and “shared value,” without sufficiently addressing its core business practices.

Similarly, we’re now seeing a version of this we can call *kindwashing*: It’s when an organization spends more time and money on marketing itself as empathetic than it does on minimizing practices that alienate or take advantage of employees and consumers. And in a strange way, the word *empathy* enables this because it is so ill-defined. If nobody can pin down exactly what the word means or what it looks like, then businesses don’t have to worry about managing employee or consumer expectations. Words and actions are left up to interpretation.

But people are watching, and a gulf is growing between corporate leaders and the people who make businesses run. For the past four years, the corporate benefits company Businessolver has released annual reports on the state of workplace empathy. Results from its 2019 study point to a notable trend: While 92 percent of CEOs say that their organizations are empathetic, only 72 percent of employees agree. Meanwhile, employees are clear about where their priorities lie: Ninety-three percent of employees are likely to stay with an empathetic employer, and 82 percent would consider leaving a job for a more empathetic organization.

Businessolver's authors skirt around clear definitions of what they mean by *empathy*—it is, after all, such a slippery word. But employees are clearly recognizing the absence of it. Within the past year alone, several high-profile companies—from WeWork and Away to Outdoor Voices and Pinterest—have endured employee outrage and worker attrition due to unempathetic business practices that contribute to work environments that have frequently been described as toxic.

The message to organizational leaders is that they need to invest more care and effort to engage their employees. This makes good business sense because research shows that taking care of employees is a necessary precondition for building and sustaining a *customer*—first culture. This can't happen until leaders commit to defining what empathy means to them, and how that leads to specific, observable actions.

This is what it means to stop kindwashing, and to start being kind.

Throughout the global pandemic and the escalating Black Lives Matter movement, we have heard from hundreds of companies expressing empathy across every known medium. For the most part, though, organizations are *reacting*—perhaps because they feel compelled to, but perhaps also because “empathy” (of any definition!) isn't an honest part of their core. Without a clear understanding of who they are or why they exist, business leaders' words will always ring hollow, and their operations will become disorganized and ad hoc. A crisis will only magnify those problems.

How does an organization fix this? It doesn't react to the moment. It looks deeply inward.

Organizations need to build and install what I call a human operating system. In technology, an operating system (OS)

supports basic functions that enable more complex tasks to happen. Without iOS or Android, we can't play Candy Crush. Similarly, a human OS serves as the structural glue that encodes how values like empathy propagate through all organizational operations, from internal behaviors, processes, and communication to external messages and actions.

At the heart of a human OS is a core essence, a central idea. It's what that company or person is *about*—and it's critical for flawless execution at all levels, during a time of crisis or not. From that central idea, an operating system has space to grow. Building a human OS fortifies the connective thread from that core to an organization's vision, mission, and values. This requires business leaders and their companies to commit to articulating a clear purpose and point of view that results in more than words in a presentation or on a corporate website.

After codifying these foundational elements, *installing* a human OS translates words into action, ensuring that every aspect of an organization's efforts is synchronized and consistent. Just as a technology operating system controls every part of a computer, a human OS drives business actions holistically—from hiring and performance management evaluation to programs, offerings, services, thought leadership, partnerships, customer experiences, brand expression, and external communications. Building and installing a human OS is what allows businesses and their leaders to align what they say they're going to do with what they *actually* do. This is a first step to putting a stop to kindwashing.

Organizations that talk about the concept of empathy typically do so because a senior leader in the company—usually the founder or the CEO—believes that caring about employees and customers is not mutually exclusive with making a profit. At the very least, that should be their ambition. So, a challenge to organizational leaders across companies of all sizes: If your HR or marketing team is going to express empathy as a

company value, it is incumbent on a leader to *model* that behavior. This asks leaders to do the work of explicitly clarifying what empathy means to them, and then laying out specific actions that they're going to take for employees and customers to demonstrate their commitment to those actions.

In a recent LinkedIn article, for instance, H&R Block's president and CEO, Jeff Jones, responded to the Black Lives Matter movement on behalf of the senior leadership team, by pledging action. "This is much more than a moment—this is a movement," he wrote, and promised, among other fixes, to expand the company's hiring practices. I called him to ask about H&R Block's process, and he said it begins with an honest review of where the company has gaps. "Filling those gaps means going deep on where the issues are," he says, "and setting clear, specific goals by function. It's not political; it's about focusing on people, individuals." That last part is key. Jones is demonstrating that the best way to model behavior is to do what most of us were taught back in first grade: *Listen*. No, really. Listen.

Carl Rogers and Richard Farson coined the term *active listening* in 1957, writing that "active listening is an important way to bring about changes in people...[it] brings about changes in peoples' attitudes toward themselves and others; it also brings about changes in their basic values and personal philosophy." Hearing someone is easy; active listening is hard work. It requires our full mental capacity, so active listening is as draining as it is rewarding. Yet at a time when companies are confused about how to behave, it is important to remember something so simple, so basic. Active listening means paying deep and close attention to how employees and customers are doing. It means taking the deliberate time to understand how they might be feeling, and why they might be feeling that way. This isn't about investing shrinking budgets into big research studies. It's about taking the time required to understand what problem empathy is trying

to solve before jumping to a presumed solution.

When massive cultural moments take hold, brands are quick to react, respond, and post. There almost seems to be a hidden, driving belief that moving the fastest will win the grand prize of higher employee retention and deeper customer loyalty. That's why we got all those "We're here for you" emails from brands we hadn't interacted with in years during the initial spread of COVID-19. The reality is that active listening requires deliberate time and effort. It means having difficult conversations with employees and customers. Intention, discussion, and commitment are all at the heart of what it means to engage in active listening for employees and consumers alike.

Not only that, but active listening is at the core of what it means to build, install, and activate a human OS for an organization or an organization's leader. News across the past several months has left behind a trail of cautionary tales. One is of Elon Musk, who repeatedly made decisions against the will of his employees. In one case, he reopened a California Tesla factory in defiance of local health officials. He said employees weren't obligated to return if they were uncomfortable, but two Tesla employees claimed they were fired when they chose not to return. Later, when Musk was uncharacteristically silent as the Black Lives Matter demonstrations began, Tesla employees threatened to stage a peaceful rally to commemorate Juneteenth. This prompted Musk to announce that Juneteenth "is henceforth considered a U.S. holiday at Tesla and SpaceX"—but unlike at major companies like Nike, Target, Adobe, Lyft, and Spotify, which simply gave employees the day off, Musk said his employees would have to take a vacation day to commemorate Juneteenth.

Musk is well-known for his eclectic views on a wide range of topics, but his actions as a leader are under scrutiny because he demonstrates a failure to *listen*—to healthcare experts, workers, and consumers. Musk may have conviction in his

beliefs, but he's holding on to an outdated OS that clashes with employer and customer values because he is not taking the time to understand what other people are feeling. Failure to do this may or may not impact Tesla's financial performance, but it *will* result in more employees speaking out and leaving his companies for ones that better align to their personal values.

Compare Musk's leadership style with that of Kenneth Chenault, who served as the CEO and chairman of American Express until 2018. He was said to consult often with his teams, asking questions like: "Who is listening to you? How many people respect you?" He applied a similar method toward listening to American Express customers, often organizing impromptu listening tours and engaging with customer service teams to better understand the quality of service and support that consumers would receive, and how to continually improve it. This is what allowed him to demonstrate kindness and care through measurable, observable, outcome-driven actions—and the company thrived during his 17-year tenure as the company's leader.

Sometimes I reflect back on corporate life, and I think about that meeting where I was asked to explain my favorite company value. If I had been given the proper time to think about it, I might have answered differently instead of trying to make an unmemorable joke. I might have said "empathy." Then, I might have gone on to say something like: "I'm going to say empathy because I think it's really important. But I don't know—because I'm not sure what we really mean when we say it. I wonder if this would be a good time for us to define what empathy means to us, and then discuss how we're going to hold ourselves accountable to it."

That response may not have earned much empathy from my colleagues. But at least it would have come from a good place.

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