What Entrepreneurship and Parenthood Taught Me About Empathy

This contributor believed in the power of empathy so much that he incorporated it into his parenting philosophy.

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Empathy — the ability to understand and be sensitive to others' thoughts and lived experiences — is one of the most important elements of any business. To illustrate, think about the top reasons great workers leave their jobs. Employees might not see a future for themselves at the company they're leaving. They might also feel overloaded with work compared to their compensation level and benefits. And management might not even be listening to them.

These reasons, particularly the ones directly related to manager-employee relationships, all tie back to empathy. Consider that a 2018 survey from Businessolver found that 60 percent of employees polled said they would actually accept *lower* pay for the chance to work at an empathetic company.

This makes sense. Leaders who prioritize empathy are truly able to connect with their employees, clients and customers. Workers should feel heard and want to know that their experiences matter. Empathy helps leaders cultivate this environment — and empathetic organizations deliver products and services that get to the heart of what their audiences

want.

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Skills you bring from home matter in the office.

I believe so strongly in the power of empathy that it also became an integral part of my parenting philosophy. My wife, MJ, and I decided early on to raise our son and daughter with a *founder's mindset.* We wanted them to grow up feeling capable and knew they would need a strong sense of empathy to connect with the people they wanted to serve.

There was some evidence for our parenting strategy. Children can start to feel empathy as early as 2 years old, according to an article in *Parents* magazine. An example would be a toddler noticing her classmate's distress and giving that unhappy child a hug.

So, MJ and I took every opportunity to cultivate empathy in our children. When people visited, we encouraged the kids to think about how to make them feel welcome. We shared details with our children about who the guests were, their relationships to us and their hobbies or career highlights. This provided material our children could draw from to start interesting conversations. The result? They could demonstrate respect for visitors and actively engage with them.

I see a direct correlation between those empathy-building exercises and the kids' founding achievements today. Annie started a running program for children with autism, and Blake launched a biosciences company. Helping others is the principle that guided their vision and shaped their success.

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I've also experienced the significance of empathy – or a lack thereof – in my own career. When Lehman Brothers failed in 2008, our venture capitalists requested a 40-person cut to our 120-person staff. No business owner wants to lay off a third of his or her employees, but market uncertainty demanded prompt action.

Some painful mistakes were made during these cuts, including my failure at that time to alert my loyal assistant to the situation – she was on vacation –until she returned and found herself jobless. This was a result of my having lost focus on empathy and I've regretted my mistake ever since.

How founders can cultivate empathy.

You don't have to be a parent or child to hone a sense of empathy, however. Even business leaders who haven't actively practiced empathy in their careers can still strengthen those instincts, and their businesses will improve as a result. Consider that in companies where leaders practice empathetic communication, employees respond more positively to critical feedback, according to this British Psychological Society study. When people don't feel belittled, they're more receptive to criticism and are motivated to improve. Here are some tips to help you practice empathy:

1. Tune in to your emotional side (and help employees to do the same).

Emotional intelligence, or the ability to recognize and deal with emotions both in yourself and in others, has sparked a lot of cultural conversation recently. In fact, when True Ventures surveyed its portfolio of customers in 2017, it found that emotional intelligence was a must-have in those investors' relationships with founders.

This means that inviting employees to discuss their emotions won’t seem so out of left field. The next time a meeting turns tense, diffuse the situation by acknowledging the tone in the room. Ask if anyone would like to share experiences, feedback or thoughts.

People might be reluctant to speak up at first, but they’ll open up if you demonstrate that their feelings are welcome. Over time, you’ll build an emotionally resilient culture in which people are less likely to get hung up on resentment and interpersonal conflict. You can achieve this outcome by establishing trust. Meetings with direct reports, safe environments and a collective sense of trust among entire teams are necessary here.

2. Consider nonverbal cues.

Without even knowing someone, you can likely gauge his or her mood just by examining nonverbal cues. The more you learn to key in on those actions, the better you’ll be able to empathize with others.

My wife and I taught Blake and Annie to always offer a firm handshake and look people in the eye. We wanted them to connect with people — to discover their mindset and needs right away. You can do the same as a leader by really engaging in conversations with colleagues and employees.

You can learn a remarkable amount about people by paying attention to what they *don’t* say. Consider why they might not feel comfortable contributing to a conversation and whether their body language is negative. Are they fidgeting, sluggish or taking on a defensive posture? These cues may open up conversations about any stress they’re feeling related to a project or general unease that’s crept into the workplace. You can also adjust your body language to create a comfortable environment. Start by maintaining eye contact instead of gazing at your phone or laptop.

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Remember when Mark Zuckerberg testified before Congress last year? Simply observing his facial expressions and mannerisms during the hearings – as well as those of other of the company’s executives – offered clues into which questions and interrogators made him and his staff uncomfortable.

Observing and experimenting with your own body language can be fun. What signals are you sending by yawning, crossing your arms, not making eye contact or reaching for your phone during any lull in a conversation?

3. Practice engaged leadership.

No matter what your schedule, search for chances to be more empathetic. When you walk into the break room and a junior associate is having a coffee, don’t just smile and move on. Ask how he’s doing, what he’s working on or what interests him about his projects. Notice how he reacts.

Research from Harvard Business School shows that businesses with hands-on startup leaders performed better than ones with aloof, distant bosses. In order for you to be hands-on, your employees must also trust you and feel comfortable when you’re around.

If you’re serious about building a sustainable, successful company, empathy is your linchpin. Without it, your venture will sink. Push more energy toward encouraging empathetic communication, and you’ll drive increased morale and performance – and create a deeper sense of camaraderie at work.

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