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By Rick Boxx

THE IMMEASURABLE VALUE OF EMPATHY

A major hospital in Texas had built a \$165 million state-of-the-art medical tower, but the staff was astounded to discover that despite the huge capital investment, patient satisfaction was a dismal one percent. The hospital's CEO told the Washington Post a study was undertaken to determine the cause for the high level of dissatisfaction. The missing ingredient, the top executive said, was empathy.

Determined to remedy the situation, the hospital took decisive steps to correct the problem. They developed new training, providing all employees with important instruction in how to practice servant leadership, and gave staff more authority for meeting patient needs without having to receive supervisory approval.

Results from the training and reshaping the working environment within the hospital were remarkable. Over time, patient satisfaction rose from one percent to 90 percent. Because staff had learned to focus more on patient needs and concerns, rather than simply completing tasks they had to perform, the patients felt cared for and valued, rather than as faceless medical cases occupying specific rooms.

The psalmist addressed the importance of such sensitivity in Psalm 69:20 when he wrote, "Reproach has broken my heart and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none." This is just as true today as it was then. When someone is lying in a hospital bed, suffering from some malady or recovering from surgery, what they need as much as skilled medical treatment is the sense that someone cares for them and understands their pain – and fears.

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Room 905, Nathan Center, 580G-K, Nathan Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong
TEL.: (852) 2805 1923 Fax (852)3747 6218 ▪ E-MAIL: enquiry@CBMC.org.hk

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However, empathy is not a quality that is expected only in medical facilities. In most businesses, customers are looking for someone who cares, whether they are buying a car, evaluating software programs, leasing office space, or choosing the right venue for an important event. The capacity for demonstrating sincere concern for customers almost certainly will richly reward you with their ongoing loyalty and patronage.

Here are some simple principles from the Bible that apply to how we approach trying to cultivate a spirit of empathy toward those we are called to serve as business and professional people:

Look at things from their perspective. Ask yourself: If you were the patient – or the customer – how would you want to be treated? The answer you give should be a good indication on how you should approach your own customers in meeting their needs and responding to their concerns. Jesus said as much in His so-called “golden rule”: *“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you”* (Matthew 7:12).

Put your interests aside and focus on others. We are all self-centered to a degree, and it takes hard work and intentionality to shift that focus onto other people. But that is what we must do to achieve high degrees of customer satisfaction. *“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others”* (Philippians 2:3-4).

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Reflection/Discussion Question

1. If you were to discover the customer satisfaction at your business or organization was very low, maybe even one percent, how would you react? What immediate steps would you take to address the problem?
2. Dealing with people is always a challenge, and we cannot please everybody every time. So why is customer satisfaction so important, since we cannot always control how they feel?
3. How would you define “empathy,” as it relates to workplace situations? What should it look like in our interactions, not only with external customers, but also with colleagues, staff, and even vendors and suppliers?
4. Why do we sometimes fail to consider the importance of treating others as we would want to be treated, if we were in their position? What can we do to avoid repeating that mistake?

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Proverbs 15:30, 20:28, 22:1,4, 27:23-27, 28:2; Acts 20:35; Romans 12:10

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