

# Improving Retail Through Emotional Intelligence

By Adele B. Lynn

I have a friend who shops often at a discount retail store. Every time he comes out of that store, he is so dissatisfied with the service, he swears he's going to write a book exposing what he sees as the insensitivity and inefficiencies of that store.

I know what you're thinking: He should just shop someplace else.

Good point. That lowers his blood pressure, but it doesn't help the store.

Ultimately, it's the store that needs to change. If every dissatisfied shopper forever forsakes a store, that store will soon go under.

So, what should retail clerks and cashiers and stock people do to help satisfy customers?

Let's stipulate at the outset that not all customers can be satisfied. Some people walk into your stores angry at the world for reasons completely unrelated to what your employees do or don't do.

But the rest of those shoppers can be made happy, so before you send your retail staff back out onto the floor again, you need to make sure they have a high emotional intelligence quotient.

As I explain in my book *The EQ Difference*, emotional intelligence is the ability to manage our relationships with ourselves and others so that we can live our intentions.

The five areas of emotional intelligence are self-awareness and self-control, empathy, social expertness, influence and mastery of vision and purpose.

For the purposes of this article, let's focus on empathy.

Empathy is the ability to understand the perspective of others.

It is the ability to understand that something in every rude customer's day gave him the attitude he brings in. Maybe traffic has put him behind schedule. Maybe she has been denied a promotion she deserved. Maybe a child or an aging parent is sick. Understanding that customers bring their personal baggage into your store is the first step in your staff's developing a positive relationship with them.

So, how should your employees improve their empathy?

First, they should ask themselves these questions:

- \* What triggers might be present that are disabling my empathy?
- \* What questions can I ask so that I can gain insight into this person's perspective?
  - \* Am I listening to build an argument or to further my case, or am I listening to understand?
  - \* Am I at risk for not understanding the perspective of the other person?
  - \* Is my intention to empathize with the other person's perspective?
  - \* What assumptions must I challenge if I intend to be more empathetic in this situation?
- \* What can I do immediately to learn about this person's perspective?
- \* What situations in my own life can I draw on to understand this person's perspective?
  - \* What did I do well to empathize with the others in this situation?

The answers to those questions might help them to improve their relationships with challenging customers. How can they improve their empathy in general to help them improve their relationships with everyone: customers, colleagues, family, friends and others in their lives?

There are many things to do, but for the purposes of this article, ask them to focus on these Eleven Steps to Improved Empathy:

1. When someone is talking to you, ask yourself what emotion is underlying his or her words.

2. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Can you understand his/ her point of view even if you don't agree with it?

3. Try to anticipate the emotional reaction of other people in a given situation.

4. Watch people's non-verbal reactions to you. What do you think they are feeling?

5. When someone says something you disagree with, active listen his or her statement. Do so in a non-judgmental way. Notice the reaction that this precipitates.

6. When someone says something you agree with, stay silent about your views and draw the other person out and ask them to tell you more.

7. Watch a television without the volume. Record it for later review. Try to read the emotions that the characters are portraying. Watch the show again with the sound to determine how accurate you were in your assessment.

8. When listening to someone, ask that person to clarify the feelings behind his / her statement, not just the facts.

9. List ten people you think are extremely empathetic. Observe their interactions with others and list the qualities, both verbal and non-verbal, that you observe.

10. List ten people who you do not think show sensitivity to others. Observe their interactions with others and list the characteristics, both verbal and non-verbal, that you observe.

11. Ask someone who you think is very empathetic to coach or mentor you.

In *The EQ Difference*, you can find many other ways to improve your empathy. But these should put you on the road to making your retail store more inviting to customers, and they should keep your customers coming back to you.

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