



## Empathy - The Surprising Truth About What Connects Us To Customers

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Late last century, four Italian neuroscientists stumbled upon a discovery that twenty years later has radically changed our understanding about the way all business relationships work.

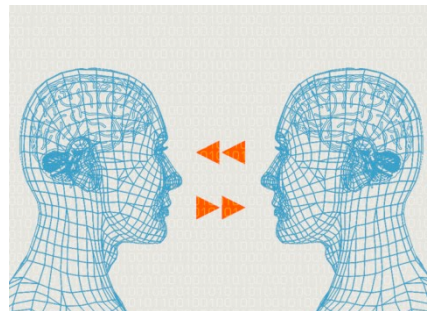
Giacomo Rizzolatti and his colleagues at the University of Parma in Italy wanted to understand how our brains work when we take action. They had set up a primate laboratory to study the brains of monkeys and placed electrodes into individual motor neurons in a monkey's premotor cortex to record brain activity as the monkey reached for different objects.

### Human See, Human Do

One day, one of the neuroscientists walked into the lab and picked up a peanut. As one of the monkeys watched him closely the monkey's premotor neurons fired just as they had earlier when the monkey had picked up the peanut himself. Given that it was the scientist who picked up the peanut, logically this made

no sense. Only his premotor neurons should have fired-up and not the monkey's. But as the monkey watched, the monkey's brain reacted as if he were picking up the peanut too.

This was new and the scientists could hardly believe what they had witnessed. Years later they were to describe these special neurons that they discovered as - mirror neurons.



As it turns out, the discovery of mirror neurons has changed everything we thought we knew about how children learn, how customers make choices, how to build effective teams, and even how leaders engage the hearts and minds of people to inspire great performance. It's mirror neurons

that help us see the world through the eyes of other people and enables you to understand the meaning of other people's actions. Thus, according to studies reported in the Scientific American Mind, mirror neurons are the hard wiring behind empathy.

### It's All About the Customer

The primary benefit of empathy is a gut sense of what's going on for other people, what they feel as well as what they think. When leaders establish an empathic connection with a customer, it can help them know what matters most to people, what motivates them and what drives sales. Empathy helps the bottom line because it helps companies reach and understand customers and provide exactly the kind of goods and services their customers want.

### Being More Than 'Mr Nice Guy'

People often consider that empathy is really just about 'being nice' to people and, as such, has limited relevance in a competitive

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commercial environment. Although the business case for being warm and friendly to customers is well established, the primary power of empathy in the business context is actually cognitive. It's about how well you really understand what customers need or what people are trying to achieve and the tasks they must perform. The more you are able to communicate accurately that you understand what your people are trying to achieve and what challenges they face in



performing their tasks, the more constructively they will work for you and do the things you want them to do. In other words, empathic connections between leaders and their people provide employees with a powerful reason to come to work every day.

## A Short Course in Listening to Get People Talking

There are a series of well-documented behaviors that

comprise the essential steps to listening well and building empathic connections. Here is a short road map for creating effective emotional connections with others to strengthen your business connections.

### Step 1. Attention Please Ladies and Gentlemen

The most obvious challenge to listening well is simple inattention. External factors — pressure schedules, multitasking, etc., distract you from giving your full attention to someone. There are also internal factors that make you inattentive — fatigue, passing premature judgment (such as approving or disapproving of the other person's statement), preparing your rebuttal, advising, or offering premature reassurance. The first step in listening well, then, involves making a commitment to suspend your own agenda for a few moments, however important, and learning to focus your attention on the person in front of you and their agenda.

### Step 2. A Posture of Involvement

In practice, empathy begins with active listening, and listening begins with being attentive. Attending involves giving your physical attention to another person by listening to them describing their experience. I was recently invited by the CEO of one of Europe's biggest banks to help them respond to a problem that was costing them millions of Euros in lost customers and business. When I asked: "How can I help?" The CEO responded by asking: "Can you get our senior Sales Directors to look customers in the eye and take an interest in them and what they need because their lack of engagement is costing us millions in lost sales!"

People tend to think of communication as a verbal process, however, most psychological research estimates that eighty-five percent of our communication is nonverbal. For example, good eye contact is an effective way of showing interest and also picking up on another person's facial messages. Also develop a body posture of involvement. You've heard the expression, 'They were



on the edge of their seats.’ In other words, when you want to communicate that you are listening to someone, lean towards the person. This conveys acceptance and that you consider what the person has to say is important.

These are the physical mechanics of listening, but what a person wants most of all from someone who listens to them is psychological presence.

### Step 3. A Question Is Worth a Thousand Words

Psychological presence is communicated by a single-minded focus on actively facilitating the process of disclosure. Once eye contact is established and your smile and body posture convey that you are giving the other person your full attention, ‘minimal encourages’ are responses that use a combination of verbal and a non-verbal cues that encourage another person to keep talking. The message they convey is: “I’m with you.” or “Please go on.”

An open invitation to talk, however briefly, is like a gift to a colleague or client. Good questions create this

invitation and facilitate conversations.

By asking questions, particularly open questions that begin with ‘What ...? How ...? Why ...?’ you provide an invitation for someone to express themselves.

Questions for clarification allow the listener to take an active interest in



what the other has to say and help to expand the discussion.

### Step 4. Pause and Paraphrase

The skill of listening well also involves the ability to respond reflectively. In a reflective response, the listener restates the content of what the person said in a way that demonstrates understanding and acceptance. Before rushing to give your response to what a person has said, it is often very helpful to pause

and paraphrase what it is you think you’ve heard. Active listening together with empathic reflection allows you to accurately identify what the customer’s real concerns are and focus on generating a more productive response.

### Building Emotional Capital

Sensing what another is feeling without them saying so, captures the essence of empathy. Others may not often tell us in words what they feel, but they do tell us in their tone of voice, facial expression, or other nonverbal ways. At the very least, empathy requires being able to read another’s emotions at a higher level. It entails sensing and responding to a person’s unspoken concerns or feelings.

Emotions convey crucial information that transcends the content of the words used. They are part of the emotional economy that passes between people. This level of empathy requires you to go beneath the speaker’s words and look for the real feelings that surround the person’s experience.

Above all, learn to suspend judgment and to develop an

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attitude of curiosity. By adopting an attitude of genuine curiosity and by suspending judgment you focus on getting to the heart of the other person's experience. By keeping your eyes engaged with the speaker, asking questions for clarification, remaining open, and paraphrasing what you hear, you overcome resistance and create the conditions for effective cooperation.

Robert Peterson, marketing professor at the University of Texas specializes in understanding the factors that determine customer satisfaction. After more than 100 research studies he has determined that the connection between customer satisfaction and repeat business involves establishing an emotional link between the customer and everyone the customer comes into contact with at your company.

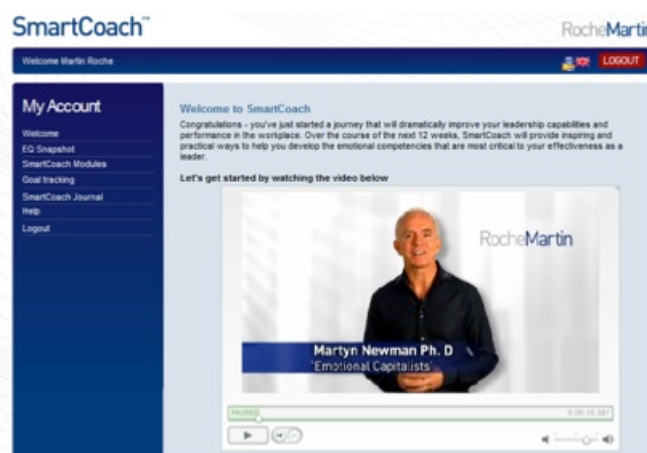
If satisfying a customer's needs has anything to do with purchasing your products or buying-in to your leadership, then developing empathy as a skill should be of enormous interest to you and your business. Of all the competencies that set you apart as a great leader, your capacity for empathy is what makes you an exceptional leader.

To increase your organization's capacity for making empathic connections with customers and stakeholders visit our online leadership coaching program – SmartCoach – at <http://www.rochemartin.com/Online-EQ-Training>

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