



## How to Empathize in Business

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

**Note to Readers:** *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley also does a blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her musings on careers, finances, and how to remove warts.*

For the past few months, I have been going through a rough patch. I've been coping with the kinds of trials that eventually cross every adult's life: illness, death, and as a direct result, short-term -- I hope -- financial difficulties. You know the saying that it's a hard, cruel world out there? Well, I've found that adage to be false. During my current travails, I've encountered a business community full of support and caring. What a fabulous revelation!

Because of my distractedness, for instance, I had totally forgotten to pay a \$1,000-plus bill from my printer. Much to my surprise, the owner nicely suggested that I pay in mini-installments. In another case, a graphic designer said she intended to return a \$500 check I had sent her to bail me out of a jam, which didn't work. I told her to keep the money because she had lived up to her end of the bargain 150 percent. After learning of my current challenges, another vendor sent me the names of some inspirational websites. He never mentioned the \$200 I had owed him for several months.

And these are business associates. My personal friends and family have barraged me with everything from fresh bakery goods to gorgeous just-cut flowers. As you read these words, you're probably wondering what on earth is going on. Eventually, in another article on another day in another month, I'll tell you. But not now. Right this minute, I want to limit the discussion to professional empathy.

If there's anything I've learned since the middle of December, it's the power of kind people to light up dark corners of existence. Now, from searching the Internet, I discover that industrial psychologists are moving full boor ahead in studying empathy's contribution to career acceleration. Among them is Bruna Martinuzzi, a Canadian consultant who recently contributed an insightful article to [www.mindtools.com](http://www.mindtools.com).

"A formal definition of empathy is the ability to identify and understand another's situation, feelings, and motives. It's our capacity to recognize the concerns people have. Empathy means putting yourself in the other person's shoes or seeing through someone else's eyes," Martinuzzi writes. "There are numerous studies that link empathy to business results. They include studies that correlate empathy with increased sales, with the performance of the best managers of product development teams, and with enhanced performance in an increasingly diverse workforce."

Who knew? I have been so touched by the empathy of others that I hope, someday down the road, to bestow the same blessing on others. If the idea interests you, here are some ways to tiptoe toward this goal:

**Trade mental places.** What if you just learned that your father had a stroke rendering him unable to talk? I suspect you would greatly appreciate a colleague's sending you the names of resources to help you muddle through such uncharted territory.



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**Take an interest.** I occasionally interact with a man without an ounce of empathy in his narcissistic psyche. In the 20 years I have known him, he has never once asked about my career, my hobbies, my interests, my family, or my values. He knows nothing more about me now than he did at our first meeting.

**Distinguish emotions.** Empathy is not codependence. The latter term means becoming so enmeshed in others' problems that you stop taking care of yourself. Empathy involves reaching out in a healthy way.

**Start with small actions.** Take it from me, simply receiving a kind email can make a world of difference to a troubled colleague. The next time you hear that someone's brother has died in a plane crash or a child has gotten leukemia, take the time to compose a short message offering your support.

**Disregard levels.** If you learn that your organization's CEO just had a child born with a serious disability, you may feel shy about contacting the individual. Get over it. Often, men and women at the highest levels of organizations are horrifically isolated, and desperately need subordinates to extend their hands.

**Expect behavioral changes.** I am not the same person I was before Christmas, when parts of my life came crashing down around me. In many ways, I am better. But, between you and me, I'm sure the alteration in my personality has spooked some associates.

**Spread the word.** On the signature line of her emails, a trainer friend in Florida always includes a quote from the ancient philosopher Plato. It says: "Always be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle."

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