Empathy is the essential skill for building trust with prospects. Yet it is rarely discussed, much less taught. But it can be learned – and I’ve developed an approach that quickly develops empathy for advisors who are willing to embrace a radical process.

The importance of being empathetic can’t be overstated. Some consider it “your most important skill.” The benefits of those who develop this skill transcend success in business. They include “greater success personally and professionally” and higher levels of happiness.

Understanding empathy

All you need to know about empathy can be gleaned from this line in Harper Lee’s novel, To Kill a Mockingbird (quoted here): “You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”

Defining empathy is straightforward. Practicing it is challenging.

Understanding hormonal differences

Men need more training to increase empathy than women. This has a scientific basis. Men, on average, produce more testosterone than women. One study (discussed here) found that administering testosterone sublingually to female volunteers reduced their empathetic abilities.

In non-scientific terms, men are hormonally programmed to be less empathetic.

Traditional ways to teach empathy

Most of us have the ability to empathize, but its full potential lies dormant in our brains. That’s where training can make a meaningful difference.

The traditional ways of teaching empathy are discussed here and include:

1. **Radical listening**: Listening intently to what is being said, without making judgments, proposing solutions or interrupting.

2. **Increasing awareness**: Think about all the people who affect your life every day, but who you never consider. Examples include those who make your clothes or pick the beans for your morning coffee. The point is to expand your thoughts from the tendency to focus on ourselves to others. This exercise is called “looking for the human in everything.”

3. **Expand your communications**: Try to make every interaction a positive experience. Talk to the
barista, the librarian, the train conductor and the salesperson. They all have something to offer and will appreciate a pleasant interaction. Doing so will make you more sensitive and caring.

**My radical approach**

After much experimentation in my workshops, I’ve developed a radical approach to teaching empathy, which is very effective and enjoyable. In a nutshell: I create a scenario and ask participants to compete to see who can provide the most non-empathetic response.

In one example, I asked advisors to deal with a client who comes into the office visibly upset. His dog died yesterday and he is grieving. He’s not sure he’s ready for his quarterly meeting to review his holdings. I challenge attendees to come up with the least sensitive response. Here are some of the “winners”:

- I’m a cat person.
- Think of how much you’ll save on dog food and vet bills.
- Fortunately, you can get another dog.

While these responses are funny, they clearly make the point about being empathetic. Before I did this exercise, I would ask advisors what they would say to a prospect who was “terrified of even a temporary loss” of their money. Most advisors responded with a brief platitude acknowledging this fear, but then explained how markets worked and extolled their ability to “protect” the prospect over the long term. This is not an empathetic response.

After training using this approach, advisors could articulate an empathetic response: “I completely understand your concern. These are scary times.”

Recognize the importance of empathy. Be open to my radical approach for learning it.

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