

Stepping Into Their Shoes

To get a sense of how other people look at the world, describe it the way they would...with them being the protagonist at center stage. Then you'll be ready to better address their needs and concerns and to collaboratively problem-solve *with* them rather than against them. **BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL**



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Q Much of our training—from Emotional Intelligence to Consultative Selling—promotes the idea of considering another person’s perspective. That’s easier said than done. Can you offer any advice on how to put it into practice?

A: A great way to understand another person’s point of view is to describe the situation the way the other person would tell the story to themselves, their friends, and their colleagues.

With few exceptions, people tend to see themselves in a positive light. We feel that we act rationally and justly, show others appropriate respect, and are good people. We are the protagonists, if not the heroes, of our life’s story.

Unfortunately, when a conflict surfaces, we tend to cast our counterpart in the role of antagonist or villain. We attribute all kinds of negative assumptions and characteristics to them. It’s how we easily make sense of the world, while protecting our “hero” status.

Our counterparts are no different. When they analyze that same conflict situation, they put themselves in the “hero” role. And they draw on all kinds of data to support their position.

So if you want to get a sense of how they look at the world, describe it the way they would...with them being the protagonist at center stage.

For example, salespeople often experience clients pushing back on price. When I consult to these salespeople, they tend to describe the clients as greedy, insensitive, and/or obtuse. “The client is trying to squeeze me, because they feel they have the upper hand. They don’t even care if this eliminates our profit. Or maybe they just don’t understand what we’re bringing to the table, even though I’ve tried explaining it to them a thousand times.”

I ask these salespeople, “If I asked your client to tell me what was going on in your situation, what would he or she say to me?” I emphasize that the client most likely would *not* say, “I am a greedy person who likes to squeeze salespeople as much

as I can. I don’t want them to make any money off of me. Who cares if they could offer me real value?!”

What happens next can be transformative. Salespeople are pressed to see the client in a more complex and favorable light. They realize the client

has a separate set of pressures and constraints that they must respond to. For example, a salesperson might envision that his client’s narrative could be: “I just stepped into this job, and I’m under tremendous scrutiny from my boss. I’ve been given a budget I must adhere to, even if I think it’s too low. I’ve looked at a few providers, and several of them could meet our needs. However, I want to give the business to this person, because I respect the way he’s approached the sale. At the same time, he keeps promoting certain aspects of his offering that really don’t matter to me. I don’t want to insult him, but I can’t justify paying for something we don’t need. So I’m doing my best to send him the work while staying within budget.”

To most effectively tell your counterpart’s story, try to consider the following:

- External factors and other parties that might be influencing or pressuring your counterpart
- The emotional impacts of the situation on your counterpart
- Your counterpart’s interests—the underlying motivators behind their demands (*why* they are asking for *what* they’re asking for)
- How your counterpart might see you and interpret your actions. You can poll your friends and colleagues about how they might see you if they were in your counterpart’s metaphorical shoes.

You’ll know you’ve done a good job if you come away feeling sympathetic to your counterpart and their situation. And with your new insight, you’ll be ready to better address their needs and concerns and to collaboratively problem-solve *with* them rather than against them. **E**