

## What's Your Empathy Index?

Last month, the Dallas Police came to my home four different times due to four false alarms while my family was out of town. Fortunately, we were not burgled. Unfortunately, the Dallas Police frown upon multiple false alarms.

I know this because Detective Jackson, in a strong and uncompromising voice, bellowed over the phone, "Mrs. Reisman, it's a law in Dallas that requires you to appear at Police Headquarters along with a representative from your alarm company to discuss this problem of repetitive false alarms. Your alarm company will be here on August 16. Would you like to come at 1:15, 1:30, 1:45, or 2:00?"

I calmly replied, "Detective Jackson, we will be out of town on that date. Can we possibly move this meeting to another time?"

"NO! This is the date you must be here, because we have already scheduled your alarm company to be at headquarters on that day."

"But Detective Jackson, we won't be here."

"What time will you schedule?"

"I guess you can put us down for 2:00. What will happen if no one shows up?"

"You will be given a citation and a fine."

I was about to hang up the phone without a win-win solution. Instead, with a sigh, I stated in a quiet voice, "Detective Jackson, you must really hate your job. You have to make these phone calls and force people to come downtown for these inconvenient meetings. I already know the false alarms were our fault; we can't even blame the alarm company! I bet you wish these meetings didn't have to take place."

Detective Jackson responded in an equally quiet voice, "Yes, I *do* hate my job. But I'm going to Hawaii soon and thank goodness for that!"

What do you think happened next? I began talking about sunscreen, books to take to Hawaii for great beach reading, and other details about her trip. Suddenly we were friends. And she asked, "Do you want to come by tomorrow for that meeting?"

"You're getting ready for your trip. Are you sure that's OK in your schedule?"

"Yes, it will be fine. What time do you want to come?"

"Detective Jackson, what time is good for you? You're the one who is extending this favor to me."

"It really doesn't matter. I'm here all day. Park in the south lot for free and have the receptionist page me."

We met the next day. My alarm company met with her on August 16.

How did we get from a no-win situation to a beautiful resolution? The answer: *empathy* — my empathy for her situation.

We have windchill factors, heat indexes, pollen counts, and air quality bar graphs. Borrowing from weather terms, what's your "Empathy Index"?

Here's the etymology of the word *empathy*: Greek *empathia*, literally, passion, from *empathEs*, emotional, from *em-* + *pathos*, feelings, emotion.

Merriam-Webster's definition of *empathy*: The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.

Karen Cortell Reisman's definition of *empathy*: Put yourself in the other person's shoes while remaining calm.

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To raise your Empathy Index, I suggest two strategies. The first is to *build rapport*. The second is to *foster empathetic listening*.

### **Building rapport**

It's easy to shatter rapport by becoming confrontational, competitive, or challenging. I could have gotten upset with Detective Jackson's inflexibility, and that would have made matters even worse. When both parties are angry, tension will accelerate.

Instead, try to identify common ground through your words and tone of voice. A suggestion that can promote this commonality is, "Let's look at this together and see what the options are." As for your tone, remain calm and cool.

### **Fostering empathetic listening**

According to Alan Chapman with [businessballs.com](http://businessballs.com), "Listening is by far the most important of all communication skills. It does not come naturally to most people, so we need to work hard at it; to stop ourselves (from) 'jumping in' and giving our opinions."

Chapman states, "Mostly, people don't listen; they just take turns speaking. We all tend to be more interested in announcing our own views and experiences than really listening and understanding others. This is ironic since we all like to be listened to and understood."

Stephen Covey says rightly that when we are understood, we feel affirmed and validated. He coined the expression: "Seek first to understand, and then to be understood," which serves as a constant reminder of the need to listen to the other person before you can expect him or her to listen to you.

For those of you who have been reading my column for a while, you've seen that I refine Covey's quote down to its smallest common denominator: "Shut up and listen."

I had a great visit with Detective Jackson. Not only did we continue our discussion about Hawaii, but I learned a fabulous tip on how to avoid unnecessary false alarms in the future. I took her a thank you note and a book for her trip.

Empathy is a powerful relationship-builder that can form the bedrock of sustainable business and careers. Empathy can also make life's little challenges easier to deal with. ■

### **Source**

- Alan Chapman at [www.businessballs.com](http://www.businessballs.com)

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