



EMPATHY at SCALE

How to Solve Your Biggest Challenges
and *Do the Best Work of Your Career*

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Chapter One: An Introduction to Empathetic Design

How Empathy Solves a Problem

The problem before me was relatively straightforward: the company was experiencing very low retention in new hires, specifically in the junior and associate levels, in the age 25–35 demographic. The client and I had gone through a few exercises to attempt a clear diagnostic and were experiencing a breakthrough. They just didn't know it yet.

“I think our onboarding might be...boring.”

The simple confession, delivered by my client in an almost-whisper, was met with sympathetic nods around the table. We were two hours into a four-hour problem discovery workshop—an intense session during which key stakeholders are brought in to collaboratively identify the root of a challenge, the beginning of a creative problem-solving journey.

I'd been brought in because I had facilitated a brainstorm for a human resources networking group on empathetic hiring processes, and my client had shared the takeaways with her team. They were now trying to incorporate empathy into their own processes.

“I get so many emails and calls with questions asking me who to contact for this, or what's the coverage for that, and people just don't remember what they learned in orientation,” the internal recruiter added. “I'm just the

recruiter. I don't handle that."

This was it—the moment of discovery. I started to challenge them.

"How do you answer those questions that come in after orientation?" I asked.

"I tell them to check their onboarding packet."

"Why do you think they still have so many questions after orientation?"

"Because they don't pay attention."

"Why don't they pay attention?" I was clearly prodding.

"Because they're looking at their phones."

"Why are they looking at their phones?" I kept pushing.

Exasperated, someone speaks up. "Because the room is a million degrees and they've been staring at a projection all day and we fed them carbs and sugar and talked at them nonstop."

And thus my had client arrived at her conclusion: maybe the onboarding process itself was the problem. I wasn't antagonizing her; the exercise I'd just put her through is the 5 Whys, where instead of accepting a basic explanation or canned answer one asks "Why?" several times until the problem or solution reveals itself.

We reviewed results from the dozens of empathetic interviews my team had conducted prior to the workshop, quotes from which were hung up on the wall as a reminder of the user's (in this case, the new employee's) perspective. People didn't feel a sense of loyalty. They didn't feel welcomed. They didn't feel helped through the process. And they didn't feel informed. Could reworking onboarding solve those problems? Could a new onboarding process be the key to increased retention?

As we worked through the rest of the day's exercises, we developed a problem statement in the form of a "How Might We" question: *How might we help new hires to feel loyalty and confidence in their new roles?*

A "How Might We" question is a tenet of empathetic design. Reworking a problem or challenge statement using how (which solution) might (because anything is possible at this point and nothing is out of the question) we (because this is collaborative and we're all in it together, equally) keeps focus on solving the right problem, but it also keeps solutions limitless, broad and

open-ended.

To begin to solve this challenge, we needed to empathize even more with new hires.

For this corporate consultation, a team was assembled that involved managers, leaders from different departments, some new hires and longtime employees who matched the demographics of the employees with low retention.

And the first thing I did? Put everyone through the next orientation. Without changing anything.

I invited the team to join a crew of new hires and expanded the invitation to include a few other existing employees, immersing them in the experience we were trying to troubleshoot. Though they were all well-versed in company policies and benefits offerings, my hypothesis was that the information conveyed within orientation itself was not the greatest challenge. For my hypothesis to be true, it would have to mean that the flaw in the experience would transcend their existing knowledge.

After the orientation, all of the participants (including my internal team of problem solvers) were given a quiz with specific questions from the presentations. While some of the information would be common knowledge to a longtime employee, some of the information would not. The results of all tested showed a 70% or less information retention rate. Even those who had been at the company as many as 15 years struggled to recall information they had just learned, even though (according to my friends in human resources) this should all have been common knowledge to any employee.

Quantitative data only tells half the story. To qualify this data, we also interviewed an equal number of existing employees we put through the orientation as well as actual new hires, asking open-ended questions about their experience. This is empathetic research.

Hearing this feedback on everything from room temperature, menu choices, timing, agenda, tone, presentation style and overall program structure resonated with the team. Having been through orientation themselves recently, the team was receptive to receiving this feedback and motivated to leverage it for a creative solution.

The team spent 4 days in a hyper-concentrated development period called a Design Sprint (we'll get to those later) and called back frequently to their recent empathetic experience. I'd also printed quotes from the qualitative interviews and plastered them all over the walls in our Sprint "War Room." During the Sprint, we came up with a new type of onboarding, and on day 5, we tested it with actual new hires.

You read that right. From problem to testable solution in 5 days. And yes, we tested it before we built it. Why?

Traditionally, to solve this problem, the team would have met a few times over the course of a year, perhaps breaking into smaller committees or task forces to tackle different elements of the onboarding process. They would make assumptions about what the new hires thought, or what they needed, or how they might react and make their decisions based on those assumptions.

They would have spent a year designing the ins and outs, the details and infrastructure of a complete overhaul of their onboarding program. Then they would have launched it, with no indication of how it might do or what success would look like, and—due to a lack of empathy—no clear understanding of the actual issue. A very expensive stab in the dark. We could have spent 6 months building new slide decks and recruiting new internal presenters or 9 months finding a new way to deliver the information. We might have even spent 12–18 months building an expensive online app for training¹.

With a smaller investment in time, energy and internal resources—also a greater investment in empathy and validation—the team could have guaranteed the success and outcome of the new onboarding program pre-launch.

This is not rocket science, and it's not magic. Organizational empathy won't have you gathering employees around a campfire and singing *kumbaya*, nor will it have you crying and unpacking feelings about your parents during an annual review. What it will do is change literally every process, program and product of your company—if only you'll let it.

Anything—a product, a service, an experience—can be improved by

¹ Actual attempted solutions to this problem carried out by other organizations.

integrating empathetic research. Research like this has brought us better can openers, nail polish brushes, phones, TVs, MRIs, cars, maps, roads...even government services. In product design, this understanding is fairly commonplace. But I believe there is an opportunity to apply empathy and empathy-based observation to our lives at work, to use the same techniques that have pioneered product design to perfect internal programs like hiring processes, onboarding, wellness programs, innovation departments and even the structure of management. I see your fully blocked calendar as a design flaw, your meeting-that-could-have-been-an-email as a consumer challenge, and your low benefits enrollment as a sales and marketing issue.

As consumers (read: all humans) begin to expect a well-designed user experience as a baseline of all of their interactions—and with company loyalty a non-concern in most employees², workplaces must begin to see employees as customers and the working experience as a service if they want to be competitive in the job market. By using product design principles, treating employees like customers and researching their challenges empathetically, companies can design an in-demand workplace that is staffed, productive and desirable. The success of an organization is directly attributed to the performance of its employees³. Happy, productive employees who stay long-term serve more than your bottom line—they are your greatest recruiters, marketers, salespeople and public relations agents. This makes empathy your greatest competitive advantage.

² McCusker, Deb & Wolfman, Ilene (1998). *Loyalty in the Eyes of Employers & Employees*. Workforce.

³ Murali, Sachin & Poddar, Aayush & Seema, A. (2017). *Employee Loyalty, Organizational Performance & Performance Evaluation – A Critical Survey*. *IOSR Journal of Business and Management (IOSR-JBM)*. 19. 00-00.