

SHIFTING OUR PERSPECTIVES ... EVERYTHING IS A GIFT!

Putting ourselves in someone else's shoes sounds so cliché these days. Most of us know what it means, and some even claim to know how to do it!

In recent times, I have to admit that I haven't really quite grasped its full meaning and potential. Like some, I thought I knew it after hearing its concept for the first time and I can even attest that I had experienced it once or twice. Little did I realize that I had only scratched the tip of its underlying power!

There is a world of difference between knowledge in our head and the wisdom in our heart and soul. Yes indeed, wisdom does lie within!

I learnt the concept of "Empathy" many years ago and I teach participants in my sales workshop that empathy is not sympathy. It is our ability to connect with another person at a deeper emotional level and also being able to demonstrate to the other person that we understand how they feel. I realize now that was only head knowledge. I had yet to grasp this wisdom in my heart until recently when I walked through a personal valley of tears and heartaches.

My only brother of more than 40 years – John Law – died on 20 October 2011 due to a hemorrhagic stroke. His brain suffered massive bleeding and he didn't regain consciousness after the brain surgery. During his last hours with us, John left me with many more valuable lessons. And I learnt all these despite John being unconscious. As he was lying on his hospital bed during the final moments, four of us – John's wife and his son, my wife and I – were at his side. While I constantly kept a vigil eye at the various life support machines, I had held on to my brother's hand, not wanting to let go and yet, I knew deep down he was going to a much better place – Heaven!

The life support machines were like a giant countdown clock. But for us, instead of it being a countdown to the new year or something festive-y, we knew it was a countdown to the last moments when John would breathe his last. With each painful passing moment, we tried to linger, to pause, to hold on and we were even trying to will the 'countdown' to stop falling.

Each fleeting moment was like a chapter of my life with John being flipped over. Our life-together chapters seemed tossed over more quickly when the 'countdown' dropped past the midpoint of its descent. I could literally feel his life fading away by the seconds. It was as if his life was falling through the cracks of my fingers, like how one would feel when we grasp a handful of beautiful warm white and fine sand in our hands. There was nothing I could do to stop the sand from slipping through.

15 hours before then, I was alone with John in the hospital's ICU (Intensive Care Unit) in the wee hours of that Thursday morning. He never regained consciousness after his surgery. With just the sounds of the various medical support machines gently beeping around us, I had an unforgettable "conversation" with John.



I quietly looked at him while he rested, and then I said to my only brother of 40 plus years – “John, what happened to all those years?” And then, as if without waiting for his reply, I went on talking about our many moments together – when we were very young, how the two of us would quietly creep into the kitchen while granddad was cooking and take some freshly fried salted fish and how we would share our spoils under a fake tent made up of various broadsheet-sized newspapers with a torchlight beaming pretending we had a kerosene lamp burning away the darkness of the night.

Then, there was the time when John got me into trouble with mum and I got spanked through no fault of mine and how he had grimaced and wrestled with guilt when he saw the tears rolling down my face. The many times we argued and fought ... and fought ... when we shared victories and defeats during badminton and ping pong challenges at the old neighborhood ... when we worked at the same company selling automobiles ... when we hugged for the first time as adults when my dad died ... when both his kidneys failed and for the first time I told John I loved him ... plus all those countless times when our moments or activities diverged temporarily and then converged again. We “talked” so much that night and yet, there was still so much more to talk about. I then realized we had only been “talking” for 30 minutes. It was past 3am when I left him to go home for a few hours before returning to the hospital in the morning. I whispered in his ear before I left “John, I’m not saying goodbye. So, see you later.”

Those precious 30 minutes of “conversation with John” felt as if time froze and we were playing-back on slow-motion DVD mode the moments of our life together. I knew we had a “real conversation”.

From then on, ‘empathy’ took on a new perspective for me with people who had experienced the loss of a loved one. Cognitive or head empathy is about knowing and doing the right thing so that the other person knows that you understand what he or she is experiencing but heart empathy is the real gift. It’s not just about doing the right thing but actually feeling, experiencing, connecting and ‘suffering’ with the other person. No words are required, just the emotions and the connection. Like trust, true empathy must be felt and experienced.

Are you a leader who can connect with employees with your heart? Are you able to fully understand the difficulties and trials of your team? Are you able to feel their anxieties and struggles?



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Are you a sales person who can connect with customers with genuine understanding of not just what they need but also why they need the product as well? Are you perceptive enough to sense your customers' personal challenges?

Every individual – employee or customer – is not just a name or a face. Everyone has a story to tell. And we will only hear the real stories – the ones beneath the iceberg – when they truly experience our unclothed empathy.

Start by leading or selling from the heart. Connect with others at the heart level, not just the head. People usually don't care how much we know until they know how much we care. They will always remember how we made them feel.

Thanks for the many gifts and precious moments,
John. I'll be seeing you again.

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