

**EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT**

“Unlock your ability to design solutions, spark innovation, and solve tough challenges with empathy.” —**ARIANNA HUFFINGTON**

**ON SALE  
5.21.19**

# Applied Empathy

**THE NEW LANGUAGE  
OF LEADERSHIP**

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Applied Empathy

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# Introduction

*Empathy* is a squishy word. Sometimes it's confused with sympathy or misinterpreted as "being nice." That isn't empathy. Empathy is about understanding. Empathy lets us see the world from other points of view and helps us form insights that can lead us to new and better ways of thinking, being, and doing.

The words *business* and *empathy* are rarely used together—in fact, for some of us they might even sound oxymoronic, but there are incredible benefits to taking on others' perspectives in the context of our professional lives. That's what *Applied Empathy* is about. Empathy is not some out-of-reach mystical power. Instead it is a skill that each of us can make a part of our daily practice and ultimately bring into the organizations we serve.

This book presents a set of tools and ideas for applying empathy to:

- Understanding your customers' needs and improving your products and services by infusing them with rich, meaningful insights gleaned from a newfound perspective.
- Connecting and collaborating with your teams more effectively—understanding the skills and styles of each

person and how to get the most out of your interactions.

- Leading with a new awareness that will undoubtedly aid you in not only understanding others better but, perhaps more important, understanding the truest aspects of your own self.

Applying empathy may seem obvious for one-to-one interactions, and it is a critical part of any good relationship, but it's also a powerful advantage when applied at the business level to gain perspective within your company's walls and in the world within which the company operates.

There are countless instances in the business world where companies have missed the opportunity to apply empathy, many of them paying dearly for the oversight.

One of the most infamous was Xerox's fumbled opportunity to lead the personal computing industry. Back in the 1960s, Xerox's 914 photocopier revolutionized the business world. At the same time, the company's innovation facility, the Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), was fast at work developing other new and insightful products. One of those was the Xerox Alto, the first fully functional personal computer. It had processing power, a graphic interface, and even a mouse. So why isn't Xerox a computing juggernaut today?

In the 1970s, Xerox's leadership was largely focused on raking in the massive profits generated by the 914 photocopier—which was not sold but leased to customers, who were charged per page—instead of looking out into the world and using empathy to sense the growing demand for personal computing. They didn't do anything with the Alto or, frankly, with many of the other great inventions that PARC was churning out. They were pre-

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occupied with their current successes and uninterested in understanding the shifting consumer needs around them. As a result, they missed one of the greatest technology booms the business world has ever experienced.

Another more recent example of a lack of empathic leadership can be seen in the music industry's inglorious failure to participate in the digital music revolution. While executives stretched their travel and expense accounts to the max and obsessed over CD distribution deals with brick-and-mortar retailers, Napster and LimeWire were hard at work building a completely new, and more empathic, distribution system that aligned with consumers and their needs (though not empathic to the artists or the record industry they were disrupting). Missing that opportunity crushed the major music labels' business and gave rise to powerhouses such as Apple Music and Spotify.

Would empathy alone have saved those companies from disaster? It's hard to say. But had they applied empathy more meaningfully in their decision-making, they could have recognized new and innovative ways to lead their businesses into the next era.

Fortunately, plenty of companies *are* applying empathy to solve tough challenges and lead teams with new and powerful insight.

A darling of the start-up world, Warby Parker's meteoric growth can be closely mapped to its executives' clear understanding of the "grit" in the retail eyewear experience. Consumers weren't getting what they needed from any of the big players in the space, and Warby Parker's founders saw an opportunity to jump into the category offering a more human, service-oriented approach that has been voraciously embraced. (Full disclosure: we've worked with them and can attest to their empathic strengths firsthand.)

One of my favorite empathic thinkers is Elon Musk. He truly

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understands the needs of the market and has proven to be a powerful innovator and entrepreneur who can apply his understanding to a variety of industries. Most recently, he's decided to take on the challenge of "soul-crushing traffic." His venture, The Boring Company, is solving this problem in an unexpected way. While everyone from Hollywood moviemakers to Ivy League-educated futurists has spent time imagining a world full of flying cars, Musk has taken his vision to a subterranean level, focusing instead on building a technologically advanced tunneling business designed to solve our increasingly gridlocked roadways by expanding them to the ground below us.

These companies and their leaders understand how to use empathy to look at problems differently and create solutions that not only disrupt conventions but use empathy as a powerful tool.

My own company, Sub Rosa, is a strategy and design studio that works with large, often complex corporations as well as progressive thinkers in government, entertainment, and the start-up world to help them evolve their businesses with empathy. We have worked with some of the world's most recognizable companies and leaders, and I'm proud that those clients have sought us out because we offer fresh solutions that support their need to explore, learn, and grow.

Our clients come to us because we can help them figure out who they truly are, what they are actually trying to accomplish, and, perhaps most important, show them how to take their goals or their businesses to a higher level.

- We've worked with countless CEOs and leadership teams to think differently about how empathy can ignite a spirit of creativity, innovation, and growth in the hearts and minds of their teams around the world.

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- We've helped one of the world's most successful athletes understand himself and his brand with empathy—giving him a mission and vision that will take his career to new heights.
- We even brought empathy into the West Wing of the Obama White House, applying our thinking to a series of initiatives started by the first family to help bring a greater sense of understanding to our nation's indigenous people's rights and resources.

Empathy lets us better understand the people we are trying to serve and gives us perspective and insight that can drive greater, more effective actions. The seemingly magical quality of empathy is the connection it helps us form with other people. Some of us are born with an overwhelming degree of empathy, while others are callous or even blind to the perspectives of others. The rest of us fall somewhere in between. But empathy is more than just a natural talent; it can also be a process, a learned skill, developed and applied when and where needed.

*Applied Empathy* begins with my journey of discovery, one that led to an early client assignment that helped those of us at Sub Rosa define who we are and how we approach our work. Through that project and others like it, we developed what we call *Empathic Archetypes* along with an understanding of the complex world within ourselves that we term the *Whole Self*. After establishing this baseline of empathic thinking, I will show you how leaders manifest empathy and how they encourage it in others. From there, we'll continue to dive deeper into empathy, looking at its role in the world around us. We'll look at its timeless nature, drawing from lessons of the past, present, and future; its application in the context of some of today's tough business challenges; how it can play a

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role in evolving our own realities; and why now, more than perhaps at any other time in human history, we need it to solve the challenges lying before us.

Our best work demands empathy, and that means each of us must be able to call on it when needed, regardless of mood or circumstances. To help elevate empathy from a buzzword to a reliable, repeatable, and responsive tool, I've taken all the lessons and thinking we've amassed on this topic and poured them into this book. May it bring to you the same appreciation for understanding it has brought to me.

CHAPTER ONE

# The Way In

“If you don’t get into trouble, you’ll never learn how to get out of it.” That was the advice a friend’s dad gave me back in 2003. I was twenty-three years old, had a little less than two years of advertising experience, and had just lost my job. I wasn’t sure about the risk I was about to take, but I was ready to meet whatever challenges I was about to face head-on.

With faith in myself and the people around me, I decided to found my own company, a design agency in New York City that would grow into the business I run today. The risk of starting my own business would be the first of many challenges I’d encounter as an entrepreneur. More than a decade later, my company, Sub Rosa, has worked with some of the world’s largest and most important brands and organizations, from Google, Johnson & Johnson, and Nike to TED, the United Nations, and even the Obama White House.

I often say we work as translators. Companies and organizations bring us in to help them establish their vision, share their message, or bring something new to the world. We work with them to create a plan, to see a path toward what they want to become, and then we help enact it. Sub Rosa is full of talented people—designers, strategists, technologists, producers, and researchers, to name a few.

We are the “land of misfit toys,” mixed with a drawer full of Swiss Army knives. Perhaps paradoxical for some, most of the time our best work leads to our own obsolescence. But we see that as a good thing. In essence, we solve problems using an approach we call Applied Empathy, and through this process we empower companies to explore, learn, and grow along with us. It’s work I’m insanely proud to spend my days doing.

So how did we get here? I had the dubious fortune of graduating from college in 2002, just when the dot-com bubble burst. It was not an easy time to get a job, and there were very few entry-level positions to be found. Whenever I did find an opening and applied, I invariably lost it to people who already had a few years of experience. It was disheartening for a wide-eyed twenty-one year old who was ready to take on the world if only someone would give him a chance.

Eventually I landed a job at a boutique advertising agency as a sort of utility player, shifting among office administrator, project manager, art department intern, and executive assistant for some of the leadership team. The job quickly exposed me to many facets of the industry, and I was able to see the ins and outs of running a company. I sponged up everything I could. In this role, I saw how important it was to understand the people around me—my bosses, colleagues, vendors, and clients—if I wanted to serve them better and get my work done effectively.

Luckily, I’ve always felt I had a knack for understanding people and situations. When I was a kid, I didn’t have a word for it, but we’re talking about empathy. No one gave me a lesson in it as I was headed out to the playground, and no one said it was something I needed to learn. But looking back at my childhood and my teenage years that followed, I recall an ability to innately sense when others were having a hard time or wrestling with a problem.

My parents tell me that when I was around ten years old, they asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I told them an “idea man.” They had no clue where I came up with this. “Idea man” wasn’t a career most ten-year-olds were thinking about. But something inside me knew I loved solving problems and using my mind to come up with ways of moving things in a better direction.

I know this makes me sound like a dork, but I was the guy who tried to help the overwhelmed substitute teacher calm down the class. It wasn’t that I had sympathy for her, but I did understand what she was going through, and I wanted to help. After school I could tell when my friends were struggling with a crisis of confidence at the free-throw line or in a relationship with someone, and I always wanted to lend a hand and tried to help them see the problem from a different perspective. In the high school lunchroom, I bounced from table to table, hanging with jocks, goths, musicians, stoners, AP students, and everyone in between. I always found ways of connecting with virtually everyone, sometimes even bringing groups together.

Don’t get the idea that I was the Dalai Lama or something. I wasn’t brokering peace deals during recess or volunteering my time in the local orphanage. I was a fairly typical middle-class kid growing up in suburban New Jersey. But I knew I was good at understanding people and seeing things from their point of view, and that was something I loved to share. It made others feel comfortable. And it was something I would always honor as an integral part of me.

During my short-lived stint at the ad agency, I relied on that skill a lot. Understanding other people’s jobs, their motivations and goals, was critical to doing my job well. I learned a lot of practical skills in those eighteen months, but I was also discovering a lot of what I didn’t want for my future. Too many people

in the working world seemed to be going through the motions. I saw emotional blindness everywhere. I saw people do their jobs, punching in at 9:00 a.m. and out at 6:00 p.m. most days.

Of course, in the ad business there were plenty of late nights and deadlines and hemming and hawing at the bar after work. But generally speaking, I felt a lack of purpose. It was a job, and that’s fine—not everyone needs to derive their life’s satisfaction from their job. Some people work to earn a living so they can pursue their passions elsewhere. But that wasn’t for me. I wanted a job that *was* an expression of my passion. I wanted to fix problems. I wanted to help people better understand themselves and those around them. As my ten-year-old self had said, I wanted to be an idea man.

After I had worked at the advertising firm for eighteen months, the universe stepped in and gave me a nudge. The company didn’t wait for me to decide if I should leave; it decided for me. I was fired without warning. The CEO thought I wasn’t spending enough time on the executive assistant part of the job, and I was out. No formal review, no negative feedback for me to try to correct. Just “This isn’t working” and “Good-bye.” In retrospect, it was the gift of a lifetime, though I definitely didn’t feel that way when it happened.

There I was, unemployed in New York City, helplessly watching my meager savings evaporate. The job market was still down, and I was having trouble finding another job fast enough. At the same time, my college girlfriend and I broke up, and the rent-controlled apartment we shared was going condo. I couldn’t live there much longer, and before I knew it, I was doing the thing that pretty much every twenty-three-year-old dreads: I moved home with my parents.

Meanwhile, my friend Albert was withering away as a software engineer at Lehman Brothers. We were both stuck and

needed to figure out how to change our lives. One night over a beer, I told Albert I had a plan. Remember, this was the early 2000s, a time when every company was looking to build a website, and I looked around and decided I'd learned just enough to be a little dangerous. I told Albert I was going to start a design firm. And I wanted him to join me.

Our resources were incredibly limited. We each had a laptop and some cheap business cards we printed ourselves. I borrowed my mom's car and drove into the city, where Albert and I networked with potential clients. Even though those were the earliest days of our business, we knew we had something many other firms didn't have. We had an innate knowledge of the Web because we'd grown up using it. On the surface, we looked like a Web design shop. But we were actually much more, an empathy-wielding problem-solving studio, even if we hadn't realized it yet.

Of course, we probably looked like a couple of kids playing grown-up, wearing suits to meetings and talking like we had heard other execs talk: "omnichannel strategies," "digital ecosystems," and whatever other catchphrase *du jour* was being bandied about in the trades that week. But underneath that schmoozy business veneer, I like to think we stood out because of our honest desire to connect with people and help them solve the problems they were facing.

We drummed up a few clients before I even told my parents what I was doing. When I sheepishly came clean to them one night, worried that they'd tell me I needed to get a "real job" or something, they surprised me.

They told me, "You don't have your own family to provide for. Or a mortgage. You can live cheap. Now's the time to give this a shot!"

That shouldn't have surprised me, because my mom and dad

had always been my biggest supporters in whatever I was doing, but I was nervous about the risk and was subconsciously looking for someone to tell me I was crazy. They did the exact opposite, and that encouragement played a pivotal role in nudging my dream into reality.

Soon enough we were making a name for ourselves, and the studio grew. We took on partners and landed some bigger clients, and I began to realize that if we wanted to differentiate ourselves as an agency, we couldn't just tell people what they wanted to hear. We would listen, we would connect, and we would always try to see the work through the perspective of the client and the audience it was trying to reach and not just offer one-sided solutions. It didn't take long before we had built a reputation as a place companies came to when they wanted to learn how to create real engagement with their customers. We were becoming known as a company that could understand audiences authentically.

The agency was getting bigger than any of us was ready to handle. We were up to around forty people, and we'd added new services such as experiential marketing (back then it was called guerrilla marketing), as well as content creation. I was exhausted, and my body was literally breaking down under the pressure. I started doing whatever I could to cope: drinking, smoking, staying out till all hours, taking whatever upper or downer I needed to avoid thinking about the next day's mess.

By 2008, the financial crisis was looming, clients' purse strings were tightening, and the company was on shaky ground. My partners wanted to go elsewhere, but I still saw potential in what we'd started. But I couldn't keep up at that pace. Something had to give.

That's when I threw out my back. I was changing the water cooler in the studio, and the next thing I knew I was lying on the

floor, the water jug glugging its contents all over me. I had herniated three discs in my lumbar spine. I ended up in the hospital, and the doctors said I needed surgery. The surgery wouldn't fix everything, but it would help the pain. I couldn't accept that diagnosis. I ambled out and went to an acupuncturist. It was my first visit to an Eastern medicine doctor. One session certainly didn't cure me, but I felt a little better. I continued seeing the acupuncturist and combined that with other forms of Eastern medicine as a way of repairing my battered body. That introduced me to an entirely new way of understanding and caring for myself. My body, mind, and spirit all needed healing, and I knew this was the start of a long journey.

I began to delve deeply into the sacred wisdom of indigenous cultures. Mesoamerican shamans, Chinese traditional medicine practitioners, Native American tribal elders, Indian yogis—all of those and more opened their world to me and helped me better connect with myself. My back was soon mended, and my spirit had stumbled onto a new path.

### A NEW PATH

In 2009, inspired by the ancient wisdom I was learning and a desire to integrate it into my work, I restructured our company, downsizing to a small core team and parting ways with my partners, who were ready to move on. I rebranded the company Sub Rosa. The term is Latin, literally “under the rose”; its colloquial meaning was that of conversations had in confidence.

The work we do for clients is modern and state of the art, but indigenous wisdom is fundamental to our practice. We don't incorporate it overtly because we know some folks aren't going to

jibe with what might seem like abstract philosophy—at least at first—but it inspires our thinking and drives the way we approach problems and reach solutions.

But before we could get to where we are today, we had to discover who we were and what kind of organization we wanted to be. We'd built a good foundation doing work for clients like Kiehl's and Absolut Vodka, helping them build programs that connected with influential consumers and thought leaders. We'd worked hand in hand with Levi's to create a campaign that established the brand's vision for its next chapter and helped it contribute in a meaningful way to local communities it cared for deeply. That was the kind of stuff we loved doing, and our successes helped establish our competency as equal parts strategic thinkers and creative doers.

We had worked with General Electric on a number of projects, ranging from its Ecomagination program to helping evolve the way the brand participates with influential thought leaders. Our partnership had developed into one of deep mutual respect based on the work we had done together. For that reason, the company came to us when it needed help with a new and complex challenge involving its medical imaging business. We were excited to continue working with the company; what we didn't know was that the assignment would provide us with an opportunity to define who we are and what we do. Looking back, it was a critical turning point for us.

It began when General Electric's chief marketing officer, Beth Comstock, presented us with an extraordinary challenge. “Today,” she said, “GE is lagging in the medical imaging business. We want to be the best.”

Of course they did. They're GE. You don't last long at General Electric if you're comfortable anywhere but in first place.

The company wanted someone to help it spur rapid change and innovation throughout its massive medical imaging business, which included CAT and PET scanners, MRIs, ultrasound scanners, and mammography systems. These medical investigative tools provide physicians with vital information about what's going on inside their patients' bodies, and they had become an important part of GE's health care revenue. The company could not afford to slip behind in this area, and their leadership believed we were the right partner to help reinvigorate the business.

I was proud that our studio of less than twenty people was being tapped for an assignment like this, but before I could even start beaming, Beth threw two conditions at us. "We can give you only five months," she said, "and you can't propose any direct product changes because that won't move our business in the right direction quickly enough." GE had already been working to develop new imaging technology and improved form factors for its machines, but those changes wouldn't be implemented for several years. They wanted to spur growth faster than that, and we were the team charged with finding a way to do so.

She also told us the company wanted to keep our scope narrow enough to be successful, so it wanted us to focus specifically on its mammography business and to use what we learned there for the other imaging tools.

"Okay," I said to myself. "All we have to do is completely reinvent the mammography experience in the next five months and help drive growth throughout the whole business."

It's a good thing I wasn't in an MRI machine at that moment, because my brain probably looked as though it were having a ministroke. My palms had started sweating, and a pasty dryness had formed in my mouth. I swallowed hard and said we were ready to take on the job.

We got back to the studio, and all of us took a moment to catch our breath. I gathered the team to begin figuring out what to do first. It turned out that none of the women on our team had ever had a mammography, meaning that we lacked any firsthand knowledge. In essence, we were being charged with improving something none of us had ever experienced—and for that matter couldn't actually change (though some of our team members did go for a mammography to understand the experience better). What's more, even though theoretically all of us could sit in a chair and go through a simulated scan, that wouldn't help us truly understand what a woman was going through when she was being tested for something as frightening as breast cancer.

GE's confidence in us and its belief that we were capable of handling a challenge like this spoke volumes to me. I had no intention of letting the company down. But to do the job right, we would have to refine our process, and that was where our empathic methodology was truly born.

### PUTTING EMPATHY INTO PRACTICE

We had already been using empathy in our work with clients, but we hadn't started using the word *empathy* to describe our methods. You could say we'd been practicing empathy, even if we hadn't been calling it that. In the end, it became clear to all of us how much empathy played a role in our work improving GE's mammography business.

To deliver for our client, we needed to immerse ourselves immediately. We knew right from the get-go that we needed to meet patients directly and connect with their stories. We needed

to understand what goes on when you get a mammogram—not just technically but emotionally. And we needed to define what success for GE would look like.

We started by mapping out the entire process. The first thing we discovered was that GE's business was focused on selling its machines to hospitals, not interacting with patients. That seemed like a rich opportunity. How could we incorporate what we learned about patients into the way GE managed its relationships with hospitals? We started to realize that if GE provided superior patient experiences through its involvement with hospitals, hospitals would have better patient feedback. Better patient feedback means higher-ranked hospitals. And in the end, if patients and hospitals are happy with the experience of a GE product, they are more inclined to grow their relationship.

That was a path we wanted to explore. We began to meet with patients, doctors, technicians, and others in the mammography screening process. Listening carefully, it became clear that the only way to get the women to open up and talk about their personal, intimate experiences was to create a warm, safe space for them.

We saw that a phone call, even an interview in an office setting, wouldn't provide the necessary level of comfort and safety. That led us to realize how important the setting for our work would be. It wasn't just about the place where we did our interviewing but also the actual rooms in which mammographies were performed. We realized we needed to create that sort of space—a safe space in which to share conversation and learn firsthand from the people we were engaging in the work. That was when things started to get interesting.

We went looking for a space that would promote natural, authentic conversation about a sometimes scary, sometimes

uncomfortable, always personal subject. Eventually we took over a vacant retail storefront in New York's SoHo neighborhood, a trendy shopping district that's also fairly residential. To some, the "obvious" home for the space might have been near a major hospital or in an office building a few floors up from the bustling city streets, but we wanted to be right in the middle of where patients lived and worked. We wanted to be something they could "happen upon" and where they could have a conversation. We wanted to be in their comfort zone and meet the participants in the research halfway.

Over a few short weeks, we outfitted the space with comfortable seating, a hospitality area where we could host larger groups, and a research library stocked with books and information about mammography and cancer treatments. We built demo waiting and exam rooms to prototype and test new ideas. We now had a living laboratory, where we discovered the value of live experimentation and testing.

It wasn't a real, functioning mammography clinic, and the women knew that. That probably wouldn't have been possible, considering the time we had for the project, nor would it have been practical. Still, portions of the space were designed to evoke the *experience* of getting an exam, to help participants feel the emotions they might feel when getting an actual mammography. We did that so we could get participants into the right headspace and so we could have meaningful conversations with them.

At the same time, we struck up a conversation with our friends at the design consultancy IDEO. We knew the team there had also done work in this space and that with a challenge this big and broad, having their medical research background would help us move more efficiently through our research.

With the space finished, and our partners and schedule all

aligned, we opened the doors and began inviting in our first round of visitors: women who regularly had mammograms, breast cancer survivors, doctors, nurses, and product engineers.

We'd trained the team to be present and to inhabit that space fully, fostering a safe environment for difficult conversations. We had to be sure that anyone we wanted to interview encountered people who were fully engaged and supportive. We knew how important it was to focus on understanding how a woman experiences a mammogram, from the moment she schedules her appointment until she leaves the facility after it's performed. We invited all types of women into the space. We had women from different socioeconomic groups. We had devoutly religious women sitting alongside atheists. We had senior citizens who had had mammograms before, chatting with women who were about to have their first screening. We did everything we could to open up the conversation and learn as much as the participants would share.

Over the first few weeks, we started to feel genuinely connected to our guests. They were coming back day after day, and they chatted with us and opened up about some of the most challenging aspects of their lives. As trust grew among all of us, we saw opportunities to push further, letting go of assumptions and asking probing, often more ambitious and deeper questions.

We wanted to know what it was like for patients in the days leading up to their screening. What were they thinking about when they went to bed at night? What were they concerned about? A group of women agreed to video journal their experiences in the days leading up to their mammography. They spoke to the camera in a way they couldn't speak to anyone else. They were raw and honest and open about their fears. Some had family histories of breast cancer and were worried about what they

might find. A few had already found lumps in their breasts and were concerned that these could be cancerous.

We quickly learned how little attention had been paid to patients' experiences. And the more we connected empathically with the women's stories, the more we began to see the challenges they faced on their journey.

A mammogram is a commonly used method of detecting a cancerous growth in a woman's breast. Generally speaking, doctors recommend that most women over the age of forty get screened every twelve months. Breast cancer moves quickly, and early detection matters greatly for a woman's chance of survival. But statistics told us that not all women have a mammogram as regularly as they should, and it was important for us to discover why.

Early on, we found out that the number one thing women hate about a mammogram is the pain of the procedure. This wasn't terribly surprising, since during a conventional mammogram, two flat panels compress the breast tissue as flat as possible so that the machine can perform with the highest level of effectiveness. It's only for a few moments, but it's not fun. As a result, nine months later, when it's time to reschedule, some women delay. Nine months slip to twelve, twelve become fifteen . . . and fifteen might be too long. That pattern, we came to find, was all too common.

The pain was a direct result of the form and function of the machine itself—and we had already been told that we couldn't change the machine. But the pain of the procedure was a big problem and one that needed our attention. Our only recourse was to discover what other parts of the experience we could fix as a way of addressing the issue of pain from a new angle.

At the same time, we were having conversations about the other elements of the exam experience. One thing we heard fre-

quently was that women hated the hospital gowns: the cheap material, the opening in the back. They were immodest. They didn't feel nice. The list went on and on. Tellingly, one woman referred to them as "the ones they give sick people." Those conversations revealed that there were plenty of opportunities to improve the overall experience—not only the gowns but also the language that caused patients to see a mammogram as a "dreadful" experience, rather than a helpful "health maintenance" procedure akin to an annual physical. That informed recommendations we would ultimately make regarding the literature given to patients in advance of the screening, as well as training for hospital staff in order to speak differently about the procedure.

At that point, we realized that many of the elements we were discussing didn't stem from GE and its business directly, but in order to solve this problem, we needed to look at those elements and see how they *could* become part of GE's business.

We continued our research into the environmental and service design elements of the patient experience, and we soon discovered that the patients hated the waiting rooms. Out-of-date magazines, ugly art, receptionists who treated patients like cattle instead of active participants in their own health. To say the rooms had been designed without any consideration of how patients would react to them would imply that they had been designed at all. The rooms we saw in our field research felt more like leftover spaces into which someone had put some badly upholstered chairs and a pump bottle of Purell. We could easily make changes there.

Keeping the importance of early detection in our minds, we knew we couldn't let minor things such as ugly gowns and crappy reading material continue to influence the overall experience and perhaps keep women from getting screened regularly. We

also found that women avoid getting screened for reasons that are more serious than the gowns and waiting rooms. We heard things such as "My insurance doesn't cover it" or "I can't find time in my day." But some responses were emotionally deeper than others—statements such as "I have three family members who died of breast cancer. I hate seeing that exam on my calendar. It feels like an appointment with death." It became increasingly clear that many women were traumatized well before the exam even started.

If we were going to recommend changes to the gowns, improvements to the waiting areas or the scheduling process, and refinements to the language used by technicians, nurses, and doctors, it would require commitment, not just from GE but from hospitals and their staffs. To create that commitment, we would need to prove that making changes to those things could affect the overall experience. Even after all we had learned, we decided we were still too narrowly focused. Talking to doctors, patients, engineers, and caregivers was a start, but we needed to seek broader insights and find ways of improving the other parts of a mammography experience. We'd spoken to the usual suspects. It was time to bring in some unusual ones.

We invited in two brands that were already expert at creating warm environments and inviting products for women: Victoria's Secret and Kiehl's. We asked them to help us think through the reimagining of the waiting rooms, changing rooms, and mammography gowns. As we designed new and improved prototypes and made other changes to the nonclinical aspects of the mammography experience, we tested them in our space, asking visitors to go through mock exams and tell us how the changes affected their experience.

Pushing that sort of thinking further, we started talking with

a whole host of other groups willing to lend their perspectives to our work. We brought in religious leaders, female designers and technologists, and documentarians expert at drawing out personal stories from their subjects. Our interaction with them was exceedingly valuable, highlighting insights derived from each of their unique perspectives and helping us think differently about ways we might reengineer the experience for the patients and, ultimately, help GE to think differently about its business as a whole.

### OUR PROCESS TURNS UP THE HEAT

Perhaps the most astounding of our solutions came from a simple but constant complaint from many patients. The second biggest factor patients negatively cited about the procedure, after the memory of pain, was the room temperature. More than three-quarters of the women we spoke to told us that the exam rooms were uncomfortably cold. Now, was that alone driving their decision on whether to schedule a screening? Probably not. But it was coming up too often for us to ignore. We had to consider it from an empathic perspective. If more than three-quarters of the people we spoke to cited discomfort with the room's temperature, we needed to understand that problem further. So we decided to ask the technicians who actually conducted the test: Why was it always so cold in the exam room?

We learned that the exam room temperatures are set in accordance with the machinery guidelines. We spoke to the engineers who'd actually designed the machines and they told us that the optimal temperature for the life span of the machines is around 65° Fahrenheit.

That's cold—especially when you're wearing a flimsy gown and a stranger is squeezing your breast between two cold metal panels. We asked more questions and weren't surprised to learn that none of the people we interviewed had given much thought to the patient's comfort. It wasn't that they didn't care about the patient, but it wasn't their job to consider the patient. Their primary concerns were the machinery, the procedure, and the test results. But if women hate the test so much that they don't get it done regularly, what good is it?

We asked the (seemingly) obvious question: What if the room were slightly warmer? Would that adversely impact the machine or the exam?

It turns out, not so much. We ran a test with Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and our partners at IDEO. We brought in volunteers who had received a mammogram recently and asked the technicians to screen them again at a warmer temperature. We hypothesized that many of the women who had found the procedure painful would complain less when it was performed at a more comfortable temperature. We were thrilled to be right. We saw a double-digit decrease in the complaints of pain! That was just one small change, and it had already made patients substantially more comfortable during exams.

But that wasn't even the most significant finding. By increasing the temperature of the room by only 10 degrees, our test showed that the efficacy of the exam *increased* significantly.

That's right, a warmer room not only produced fewer complaints of pain, it also helped technicians and doctors detect more cancer cells in the breast tissue. When the room is warmer, the patient is more relaxed, which in turn keeps muscle tissue from tensing up, thereby allowing more rays to travel through the breast tissue and the test to be performed with greater clarity.

How had that simple change been overlooked for so long? It was no one's fault, really. No one had ever taken a holistic look at the experience and poked and prodded at the findings the way we did. We were being curious. We were trying to understand. And in that pursuit of understanding each element in the process, we found an opening. We found something so minor yet at the same time so major it might actually save lives.

We were elated and began to develop a whole new approach to the business, which we would share with our clients at GE. We took our findings to them and proposed that they grow their business by doing more than simply selling their product to hospitals and leaving it at that. They needed to take into consideration every aspect of the exam outside the exam equipment itself—from the terminology used by the staff to the gowns, the temperature, the lighting, and perhaps even the scent of the room. For GE, that meant a combined product/service offering, which ultimately became known as GE Imaging Centers—physical environments tailored to improving the comfort and well-being of patients.

That was something they had never considered. In essence, we were telling them that the way to improve their imaging business was not just by selling machines but by providing services that put their machines into the best, most empathically designed environments possible.

After our full presentation to the people at GE, we held our breath—waiting for their reaction. They smiled and said that our work was exactly the sort of thing they had been hoping we'd uncover, and all of us shared a moment of relief and pride. As a next step, they asked us to attend the annual meeting of the Radiological Society of North America, a trade convention being held on a subzero Thanksgiving weekend in Chicago. (An unempathic time and place for many conference attendees, but so be

it.) Despite having to cut our holiday weekend short, we were pretty stoked because we were going there with some big news, and to make it even more exciting, it was being presented by a pretty powerful spokesman for our work, GE's chairman, Jeff Immelt.

Mr. Immelt was scheduled to give the keynote address, and during one part of his talk, he would tell the story of our experiment and announce the new offering to the room full of hospital and clinic managers. As soon as his speech was finished, GE's people started receiving inquiries, and before they knew it, they were signing up customers for the new service on the spot. That was completely unexpected. They'd assumed they'd get some inquiries, perhaps a hit or two in the trade media, but orders right there in the room? It was amazing to see it happen. Over the next few years, the business continued to grow and evolve as GE became more invested in the category and its emphasis on the power of empathy to solve problems for their customers.

In a larger sense, I believe that our work with GE helped change the way the organization thinks about its customers in all categories of its business. It was enormously gratifying to realize that we helped our client solve a complex challenge and expand its reach, but just as significantly, we helped to improve the mammography experience—which we hope has led to an improvement in the well-being of many people.

### GOING WHERE EMPATHY TAKES YOU

That's the thing about this sort of work. You never really know what's going to happen when you start, but as you dive in and

trust your empathic instincts and intuition, you are led into exciting new territories. For us, the work gave us a powerful foundation in our Applied Empathy approach. We didn't know it at the time, but while we were testing our thinking and prototyping our work, we were also discovering our true north.

Years later, I would look back at that assignment and see it as our origin story. At the time we were just doing what we innately knew best. But somewhere further down the road, we'd proudly see that important work as the start of everything that was to come.

### CHAPTER 1 EXERCISES

## Establishing Perspective

Honing your ability to view a situation from a perspective other than your own is one of the first things you must do to gain a stronger sense of empathy. The challenge comes in dropping your biases and points of view, which will free you to truly “see” from someone else's vantage.

To begin, take a moment to identify an issue you are trying to solve. It can be a personal or a professional challenge.

*Some workplace examples might include:*

- How can I build a better product for our customers?
- What is the smartest way to grow my organization?
- Who are the people I need on my team in order to be successful?

*Or personal questions such as:*

- Why do I have a hard time communicating my emotions to my partner?
- How can my family connect to each other on a deeper level?
- What do my friends rely on me for the most?

Once you've identified the right question, you'll want to establish three (or more) different perspectives you can use to evaluate it from new angles.

For example, if I were to take “How can I build a better product for our customers?” I might consider:

- My own perspective
- My customers' perspective
- My competitors' perspective

You will discover distinct insights as you consider the question from different perspectives. Let's say I'm a smartphone manufacturer and I want to improve my product. I might think I should increase its functionality, but it turns out that my customers care more about paying a lower price than having more features. Or perhaps I think the phone would be improved by faster speed, but then I discover that my competitors' greatest concern is that we have a more powerful design capability.

## The Way In

If I were to pursue this from only my perspective, I would focus on increasing the smartphone's functionality and speed. But taking into account the perspectives of my customers and my competitors, I realize that I need to deliver a more affordable product that continues to push the limits of good design while also fulfilling the function that I believe is right for the product.

Considering a question from multiple perspectives will help you make more well-rounded and better decisions.

Play around with the idea of perspectives. The "personal/customer/competitor" configuration is just one of many you can devise. You might find that some problems benefit from being viewed through another set of points of view, such as "colleague/elder/child."

You may find you need to do some research to understand the different perspectives. Talk to your customers or your competitors. Read articles or watch content that you think different audiences might consume. Play the part. Embody their point of view. Think of it as part ethnography and part method acting.

There's no wrong way to do this. Experiment with a variety of perspectives; just be sure they are varied enough that they cause you to step outside of your own point of view.

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