

A DISTURBING DEFICIT

In the United States, most people are concerned rightly about a 1.6 trillion dollar federal budget deficit, yet there is another deficit that is far more insidious and perilous to business—a diminution of empathy.

In 2010, researchers found that empathy among college students is at an all-time low. Seventy-five percent of the students tested reported the lowest scores on empathy in the thirty-plus years that social scientists have been studying this. These all-time-low empathy scores are happening against the backdrop of all-time-high narcissism scores.

We have a coming-of-age generation that would rather text than talk, send an abbreviated e-mail over a hand-written note, and make a quick cell-phone call versus invest face time with someone in deep conversation. On one hand, this presents a significant challenge for sales managers that recruit from the ranks of college students. On the other hand, this offers a great opportunity for salespeople who rely on empathy and people skills to build relationships with customers. Professional selling is a people business.

Humans are social creatures. We are hard wired to interact physically with other people. We want to do business with those whom we trust and like. Carl Rogers, father of client-centered therapy, wrote, "Nothing feels so good as being understood, not evaluated or judged." Actively listening to customers requires that we set aside personal biases (put narcissism on hold) and understand (empathize with) their reality, as subjective as it appears. Who would have thought that an ageless concept like empathy would become the new frontier for differentiation?

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