

The Patient Experience Post Healthcare's Resource for Service Excellence August 2018



Since the mid-1990s, Baird has helped healthcare organizations nationwide improve the patient experience and enhance organizational culture. Baird's culture assessment and diagnosis include experience mapping, medical mystery shopping, and focus groups to reveal the real customer experiences within your organization. Using your patients' experiences, Baird and her team prescribe critical next steps for improving patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores.

Lessons from the field: Do you really understand?

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In our [Power of One training](#), we spend a lot of time talking about [empathy](#): what it is, how to [express it](#) verbally and non-verbally, and what the barriers there are to demonstrating empathy. We do several interactive activities to drive home the message and invariably, someone says, "I never say, 'I understand,' because there's no way I can – I'm not them." And almost always, someone else replies, "But what if you've gone through the same thing? Then you can say you understand, because you do."

I usually respond with advice like, "Do what is comfortable for you," or "To be safe, say something like, 'I can see that you're upset.'" Two things happened to me recently that will make me change my response in the future. A friend of mine recently lost her sister and, in expressing my sympathy, I said to her, "I'm so sorry for your loss. I lost my niece under similar circumstances, so I know what you are going through." She looked at me very kindly and said, "Thank you – I know you are always here for me and I appreciate that. While we have both lost someone we love, it's such a personal and unique experience for each of us, I'm not sure anyone can really understand what I am feeling in this moment." If she weren't so kind about her response, I think her response might have offended me. The experience bothered me so much, that I spoke about it with my coach. My coach helped me to realize that no matter what the circumstances, empathy is about the other person and not me. What I may or may not have experienced is irrelevant – what I can do for the other person is what matters.

This lesson was further reinforced in an article I read on MSN, [People Who Say These 5 Words Have Very Low Emotional Intelligence](#). Citing a new book about emotional intelligence, the author, Bill Murphy, Jr. talks about the difference between a shift response (guiding the conversation to your life experiences) and a support response (keeping the focus on the other person's feelings and experience). He even gives examples of both kinds of responses to specific common scenarios. I've faced similar situations and as I reflect, I've provided both shift and support responses, not realizing there was a difference.

If you read the article, or better yet, the source book (which I've ordered and will be reviewing in the near future!), you'll find some strategies for success. As for me, not only will I be paying more attention to my own

responses, when the topic comes up in class, my advice will be this: Empathy is the ability to sense other people's emotions combined with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. Empathy is a thought process - there's nothing in the definition that implies or requires action. What we teach then, is how to demonstrate empathy to show that you care and that the other person matters. It is the desire to provide great customer service, coupled with the recognition that your customer is in need that should be driving the action. So, I am no longer going to say that empathy is about demonstrating that "you get it." I'm going to say that in order to provide great customer service, you need to recognize that your customer is in need ([empathy](#)) and you need to offer your support by communicating verbally and non-verbally that you are there for the person. You can say, "I'm sorry that happened" or "I can see you are upset," or "Thank you for sharing," but what you DO in response is what really matters. Get it?

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