

5 Clues Your Advisor is Empathetic Enough to Help

Article | April 25, 2018

Why should you look for an empathetic business advisor? It's the difference between the same old sales pitch, and a trusted advisor that engages, relates to, and understands your organization and your people. When evaluating advisors, bedside manner should be right up there alongside cost, experience, and customer references.

First the bad news—you have a life threatening medical condition. As for the good news, you have two choices for a doctor.

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The first doctor was top of his class at a leading medical school, is conducting ground-breaking research, and is recognized by peers as a brilliant technician. There's one small problem—he is very detached and clinical when you meet with him.

The second doctor graduated from an accredited medical school and whilst she is not as distinguished in her academic career, she is engaged, asks the right questions and is empathetic about your condition.

Who do you pick?

According to the [latest medical research](#), if you picked the first doctor in the above scenario, you have a lower

likelihood of survival. The reason why? It's not because the second doctor knows more about your current condition, it's because she is exercising exceptional bedside manner and emotional intelligence.

Bedside manner is not only key in how we perceive and experience a medical professional, it is an important determinant in how effective they are in improving your health. This is an equally important idea for a business decision-maker establishing a relationship with a trusted professional business advisor.

Bedside manner is a crucial advisory skill

Much like a visit to the doctor, when your organization asks an external advisor to help deal with an ailment, you're embarking on a relationship [rooted in open dialogue between the parties, trust, and vulnerability](#). Exceptional advisors are, therefore, akin to excellent doctors—they focus on the human being as a whole and not merely the disease at hand. They advise on the immediate pain points with the required technical competence, but they apply their skills within the context of your whole business—which can be a complex undertaking.

Yet, surprisingly, few companies formally integrate empathy or 'bedside manner' into their assessment of potential advisors. Often, the concept is downplayed or ignored—putting their business at risk. In contrast, bedside manner should be front and centre when evaluating potential business advisors.

Empathy is essential, not a 'nice to have'

Each business operates as a distinct, complex ecosystem. Within the ecosystem there are immediate issues, symptoms and ailments that must be urgently resolved. But there's also a litany of inter-locked, medium and long-term factors that play a significant role in a business' health and competitive advantage. Fixes and solutions must be considered within this holistic context to minimize risk and maximize return. As with the human body, short-term 'quick fix' thinking can easily gloss over important underlying issues within your company.

Therefore, pragmatic, focused empathy should be the most effective tool in the advisor's toolbox. Effective advisors are masters of applied empathy; not because it improves their ability to find the right solution for your problems, but because it is central to effectively deploying their technical ability. Conversely, when an advisor simply follows an entrenched engagement protocol—dragging out the same old sales pitch to win your business, or using a canned approach to solve a problem—without taking the time to get to know you and your company properly, the risks can be significant. At the very least, you're unlikely to get the kind of deep value that is possible when a trusted advisor seeks to genuinely engage, relate to, and understand your organization and your people.

Key assessment points

The basic methods we use to assess a doctor's bedside manner can also gauge the potential value of a professional services partnership. Here are a few clues to indicate if you have an empathetic advisor on your hands:

1. **Lecturing or listening?** Did the advisor ask enough questions to really understand your unique situation or were they confident they had “*seen this a million times before*”? Were they the right questions that unearthed insights into the problem?
2. **Are you more than ‘an account’?** How do they treat any personal statement you make? Are they engaged in what you say about yourself or your experiences or are they ignoring that and moving on to the next part of the conversation (that is, the conversation is all about them)?
3. **Were you ‘baffled by BS’?** Were they speaking your language or were you overwhelmed with jargon? Did they use any materials they brought to highlight things you actually wanted to know, or was it death by PowerPoint?
4. **What does your gut say?** Listen to your instincts—did you walk away from the meeting feeling like you were heard and understood?
5. **Ask the perception at reception.** Ask your receptionist or executive assistant as they will often have an unguarded view into how this advisor treats people. If your potential advisor is rude, impersonal or high-handed on the first meeting, it isn’t going to get better.

Bedside manner as a buying criteria

The above questions shouldn’t be asked or answered by decision makers on an informal or anecdotal level. Rather, they should form part of your company’s dispassionate assessment scorecard. Simply put, bedside manner should be right up there alongside cost, experience and customer references.

Approaching a prospective relationship in this way allows you to assess the full range of possibilities, up front. It creates a clear mechanism through which to understand the candidate’s ability to solve your immediate needs *and* its capacity to help you identify and address nuanced—and often hidden—issues and opportunities within your business. Crucially, a structured approach to bedside manner can mitigate the powerful impact of reputation on buying decisions. Like it or not, most people are risk averse and choose big firms, regardless of their personal experience; as the old adage goes “nobody ever got fired for hiring Arthur Anderson” and we all know what happened to this firm. Indeed, in the world of professional services, status and reputation often play a disproportionately large role in who gets hired. The bigger the reputation of the advisor or the firm, the more likely we are to see their comments through a halo, and to then defer to their judgement. When this happens, it’s all too easy to hire an advisor who only has a surface level interaction with your culture and never understands the deeper business context, when what you really need is an advisor who is deeply in touch with your business needs.

Advisor's empathy – the why and how

A professional advisor who understands your company as the complex entity it is, has a better chance in helping you create value.

Understanding the clues to empathy and incorporating them into your selection process, alongside other key criteria, will enable you to address both the short and long-term issues nagging your business, while allowing you to reap valuable rewards from your investment in a professional advisor.

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