

July 19, 2005



This Week's Column by Elaine Brodsky and Pamela Mitchell

- [Recent Columns](#)

On Being Too Nice

Studies show women have better intuitive and social skills -- which can give them an edge in business. But only if applied on balance.

Women's natural talent for building intuitive, empathetic relationships can both help us and hurt us in business. An old *Psychology Today* noted the differences in how men and women process their experiences. Men, it said, focus on minute detail and operate most easily with a certain detachment. Women, however, are intuitive people-readers: "Females are gifted at detecting the feelings and thoughts of others, inferring intentions, absorbing contextual clues and responding in emotionally appropriate ways. They empathize. Tuned to others, they more readily see alternate sides of an argument. Such empathy fosters communication and primes females for attachment."

In the past, popular wisdom held that a talent for empathy and creating attachments was a weakness in the office. "Business first" was the rallying cry, and we were told that in order to remain competitive it was necessary to think only of the needs of the company. Considering and accommodating the needs of the "other side" (whether it be employees, clients or work colleagues) would put us at a disadvantage, and inevitably cause us to fail. Nowadays, however, business has woken up to the fact that intuitive, empathetic relationship-building strategies can actually provide a competitive edge and that our natural female aptitude, when used wisely, is a potent tool for success.

Mercedes LaPorta of Mercedes Electric Supply, a Miami-based electrical distributor with over \$20 million in revenues, is a great example of how intuitive, empathetic relationship-building can deliver success. Her company -- in what is still a very male-dominated field -- is known for having one of the top staff in the industry. She attributes this to what she calls her "whole employee" philosophy, which allows her to attract and retain good employees. She looks at her staff not just from the business end of things but from a personal side as well: "What they're into; their families; the whole thing." Although she's turned this into a model for success, she warned that this attribute can easily become a disadvantage. She's managed during her 26 years in business, however, to walk that fine line.

We heard a cautionary tale about the potential pitfalls from Anisa Hunt, who told us about how building empathetic relationships with your employees can sometimes backfire. She, like Mercedes, counts relationship-building as one of the talents that helped her build a successful cosmetics accessories firm with \$12 million in

revenues. But with one employee, the line between relationship and business became blurred: "I became more like a counselor or consultant or someone who hears their tale of woe instead of saying: What about the numbers? Why aren't your sales where they need to be?" It got to the point where the situation was hurting the company, and she had to let the employee go. Anisa realized that if she had had clearer boundaries, she might have been able to retain the staffer. Her takeaway: "I need to be a good boss number one, so they can keep their jobs."

So what do we do to make sure that our natural aptitude for creating intuitive, empathetic relationships with our employees helps us rather than harms us? In our experience we've found that it's best when you pay attention to nurturing but aren't afraid to get tough when necessary -- as Anisa found, limits and boundaries are essential. She also offered another piece of wisdom from her experience: We must remember that business is the reason for the connection, and that the business must go well in order for the relationship to go well -- the survival and welfare of the company must come first. Adding layers can help us maintain some needed distance, although we can balance that -- as Mercedes does -- by having an "open door" policy. Another way is to decide which topics are acceptable and appropriate for general office discussion (i.e. weekend activities, vacation travel, hobbies) and which ones are off-limits (day-by-day 'life dramas'; i.e. problems with spouses, kids, finances, etc.) can also help. (Note: We are not saying that you must force your employees to pretend they're not having personal problems, just that sometimes it's better not to get into the particulars so that you don't turn into their psychiatrist. But if something serious is happening -- like domestic abuse, or a critically ill family member -- we think it's best to do what you can to offer assistance.) These techniques can help assure that the empathetic, intuitive attachments you form with your employees become a source of strength and success.